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## Shadows Over Goshen: Plain Whites, Progressives and Paternalism in the Depression South

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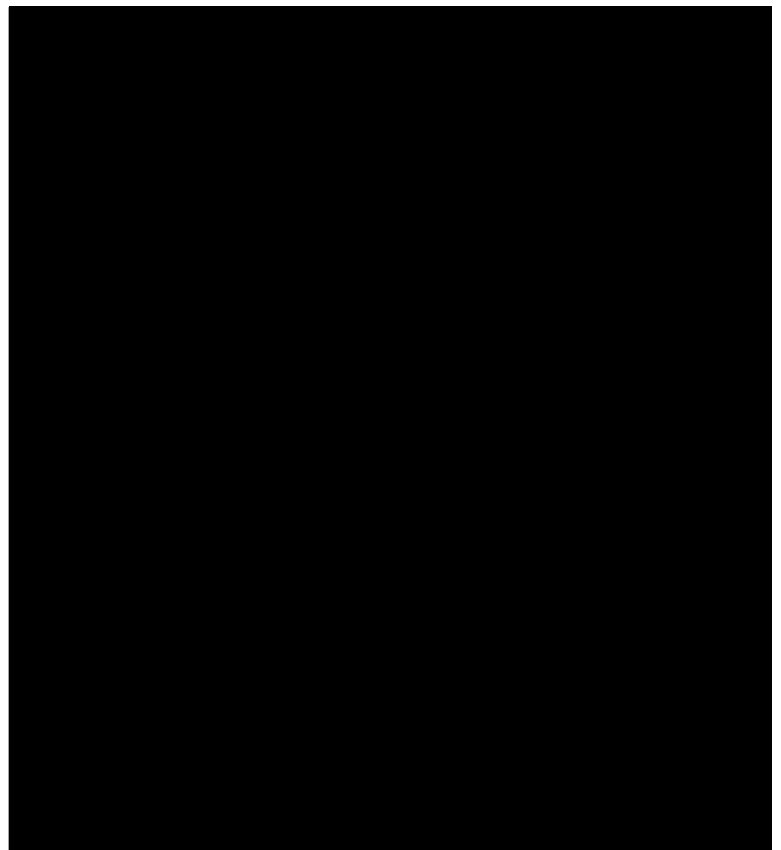
SHADOWS OVER GOSHEN: PLAIN WHITES,  
PROGRESSIVES AND PATERNALISM IN THE DEPRESSION SOUTH

by

Freddy Carl Smith

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office  
of The University of Southern Mississippi  
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy



August 2008





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Abstract of a Dissertation  
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ABSTRACT

SHADOWS OVER GOSHEN: PLAIN WHITES,  
PROGRESSIVES AND PATERNALISM IN THE DEPRESSION SOUTH

by  
Fred C. Smith

This dissertation is about poverty and rural Southerners and the beginnings of America's rational assault on poverty. By 1932, a sense of emergency and desperation permeated American economic and political thinking. The apparent collapse of the industrial economy and credit markets created an environment in which politicians allowed and the public demanded bold experimentation. The period, 1933-1937, in which most of America approved or tolerated progressive notions, offered an opportunity for progressives to demonstrate their solutions to persistent southern poverty.

The Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH), an agency of the Department of Interior, created communities that combined subsistence gardening with part-time wage work. The Resettlement Administration (RA) developed the New Deal's most progressive efforts to cure southern poverty, entire towns populated by subsistence yeoman farmers. However, other progressives, especially liberal churchmen and the Socialist Party of America envisioned a more radical solution for rural southern poverty.

This study of three communitarian projects reveals that the clients of those communities, representing the lower and lower middle class, were intensely concerned with maintaining or achieving a specific class status. A subordinate thesis

of this dissertation, evidenced by the words of the clients, suggests that the dispossessed (for whatever reasons) rural Southerners made a distinction between “poor whites” and “plain whites.” All of the clients of the communities in this study were poor; not all of them were plain. “Plain whites,” as employed in this study, refers to poor rural southerners without access to financial or political power. Three projects typify the approach by progressive liberals of the 1930s. Success for all three projects would be determined, in large part, by the willingness of their clients to forego voluntarily some of the privileges and rights associated with American individualism. In all three projects success depended on the economic cooperation of the clients. The Tupelo Homesteads were designed to meet the requirements of a “pleasure economy” and a radically different manufacturing world. Dyess Colony was an attempt to create in flesh and blood what had often been an American myth, a robust class of independent and disinterested yeoman farmers. Delta Cooperative Farm was supposed to give the means of production to the people and to turn the hearts of man to God. To say, categorically, that these projects failed is to ignore the primary purpose of experimentation.

All three projects promised dignity, self-determination, and refuge for those at the bottom of the economic pyramid. Activists associated with New Deal in general and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, Division of Subsistence Homesteads, Works Progress Administration, Resettlement Administration, and Farm Security Administration in particular encouraged their clients to be satisfied with subsistence. The Socialist Party of America joined with a coterie of liberal churchmen and promised social and economic justice and control of the means of

production. Despite the powerful influence of such notables as Rexford G. Tugwell, M. L. Wilson, Lawrence Westbrook, Harry Hopkins, Sherwood Eddy, and most famously, Reinhold Niebuhr, the clients refused to abandon their notions of dignity and their aspirations to upward mobility.

Arguably, the greatest benefit from experimentation is falsification of theory. Two of the experiments, Tupelo Homesteads and Dyess Colony were certain to be failures from the very beginning. The failure of Delta Cooperative Farm was self-inflicted by its liberal leaders. The various “wars” on poverty since the Great Depression have been shaped, in part, by the first attempts of liberal progressives to take advantage of the crises and opportunities of the Great Depression.

## DEDICATION

Fred and Mattie Jewell would have been especially proud to see this. To their memory, I dedicate this work.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Any attempt to acknowledge adequately those who contributed to this study and the associated degree is an exercise in futility and frustration. Different people at sundry times aided and abetted in this effort. For some the contributions were decidedly un-academic, others challenged and enlightened. However, there is no hope that this attempt to acknowledge a few will not also be an exercise of futility and frustration.

Three friends in particular have been constant during this entire process. Brian McKnight and Jim Humphrey preceded me at Mississippi State and remained in touch and of assistance as I entered doctoral studies at the University of Southern Mississippi. A third friend, Sara Morris, also just happens to be a research librarian of astounding ability. The mere suggestion that a certain item could not be found personally affronted her. She found everything we asked for.

A generous research grant by the History Department at the University of Southern Mississippi allowed me to examine archival material at the FDR Library, the University of Arkansas, the University of Missouri, the University of North Carolina, Duke University, and the National Archives II. In addition to the research assistance, the department provided the opportunity to develop my teaching skills. I am particularly appreciative of the one year I spent as a full time instructor.

Richard Damms at Mississippi State, my first graduate advisor and mentor, caused a spike in the red-ink market in his “modifications” to my writing. He encouraged me, among other ways, by simply expecting that I would do acceptable

work. Connie Lester refused to be driven to distraction (at least in my presence) by interruptions and wild speculations.

Chuck Bolton has been particularly supportive and helpful. Dr. Bolton was originally my graduate and dissertation advisor. He consented to remain on my committee upon his departure for the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Dr. Bolton is worthy of emulation; he brings professionalism to every endeavor he undertakes. His critique of my teaching has been invaluable. He is insightful and has an ear for “teaching moments,” which, as he points out, occur in any historical consideration.

I am especially grateful to my dissertation director, Louis Kyriakouides. He has been both generous and effective with his time. Association with “Dr. K,” has been particularly beneficial for me. Kyriakouides is a fine and accomplished historian in the humanities tradition. He is also, a Social Scientist in the best sense of that discipline. Association with Dr. Kyriakouides has broadened my horizons with both the application and theory of history.

Martha Swain is responsible for putting into my head notions about writing about non-elite white folks and their interaction with the New Deal. What began as a search for a topic for an undergraduate research paper has become this dissertation, and indeed, the general thrust of my post-graduate concentration. It is the result of a summer afternoon’s conversation with Dr. Swain.

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## INTRODUCTION

Mrs. Joe Alexander was not satisfied that the application blank she had just completed was sufficient. The blanks asked only for the stark facts relative to her family's shame; there was no provision for explaining the exceptional circumstances that had caused the family to fall from respectability to poverty. In her mind, at least, poverty and respectability were, with some exceptions, mutually exclusive. The application blanks were stark and sterile; there was no place to explain how and why they had fallen into poverty. Her letter of 8 October 1934 endeavored to give Mr. Dyess "a few facts" and to demonstrate – in a way that facts derived from blanks could not – that her family deserved a place at Arkansas Colonization Project No. 1. Her letter is interesting, if for no other reason, because it reveals that the Alexander family had experienced almost every one of the depression-era phenomena that characterized rural southern families.<sup>1</sup>

According to the almost embarrassingly transparent revelations in her letter, the Alexander family had survived the boll weevil and the Delta floods of 1912 – 1913. They had struggled by until the cotton boom in 1916 brought them a crop big enough and rich enough to pay off their old debts. In the years between the "overflows" and the 1916 cotton crop the Alexanders had been forced to accept furnish and financing from the local furnishing merchant/cotton factor. Several times since their marriage in 1910, they had deposited significant sums in the Blytheville bank. Beginning with 160 acres of Delta land in Mississippi County, Arkansas, bequeathed by her father, they owned a succession

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to William R. Dyess from Mrs. Joe Alexander, Blytheville, AR, 8 October 1934, in the University of Arkansas Special Collections, Works Progress Administration File, MS UN3, hereinafter "WPA Administration File." Colonization Project No. 1. was renamed Dyess Colony in Honor of its chief founder, William R. Dyess.

of farms, always upgrading their property and banking the profits. In the process of buying and selling they spent one crop year as tenants on a large plantation near Osceola, for them a satisfactory year. They had three industrious non-drinking boys; the oldest was twenty-three and still living at home. Their twenty-year-old son was “working his way through college on football,” and their seventeen-year old was a graduating senior in high school. They had an ample work force. The family had, in one year, raised and sold 756 Rhode Island Red chicks and the family had always kept at least two Jersey cows for domestic and commercial use. Malaria and the desire to move the boys closer to a town school motivated their move to Blytheville. The Alexander family was a fine example of small farmers, of southern yeomanry.<sup>2</sup>

Just as the family sold its latest farm, banked the proceeds from its sale, and was “about to invest in a farm close enough to town for the boys to attend the city schools,” the bank failed. The savings of twenty-eight years of hard work and frugality had vanished. For the past four years, Joe Alexander had worked less than sixteen weeks a year at the rate of \$18.00 a week. After narrating these facts, the now penniless Alexander, in her letter neatly summarized the family’s embarrassed condition, “So you see we cannot save any money for future needs.” No doubt, Mrs. Alexander thought that the series of “exceptional circumstances” would somehow differentiate her family from others seeking the same kind of opportunity. It did not. Accounts of the boll weevil, floods, drought, tenancy, ruinous prices, ill-health, and diminishing agricultural opportunities were ubiquitous in the letters of desperate southerners to the “government men” that ran the huge relief/rehabilitation efforts of the New Deal. The Alexander

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences were so common that the family was an almost perfect physical manifestation of the rural southern stereotype. They were living clichés. Indeed, in comparison to other letters of the same genre, there is nothing noteworthy or remarkable in the family's circumstances. There was ample justification for FDR's assertion that they, and thousands of others for whom the Andersons were stereotypical, constituted "America's number one economic problem."<sup>3</sup>

In 1933, Americans were still generous and compassionate toward the deserving and working poor. Americans were also near despair. The combination of native compassion, desperation, and the thaumaturgy of newly elected President Franklin D. Roosevelt created a social and political environment that encouraged, even demanded, bold experimentation. The FDR administration fulfilled the new President's pledge to "take action and take action now." The New Deal that emerged from the confluence of despair, compassion, and politics was, despite the characterization of many commentators and scholars, not solely given over to liberal or progressive experimentation. The New Deal was, necessarily, Janus-faced. The dominant policy makers within the Agricultural

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* "WPA Management File" contains over 300 similar letters. Other letters of the same genre are located in Record Group 69, National Archives and Records Administration II (NARA II), WPA Central Office Records, hereinafter "WPA Central Office Records," and in Record Group 96, Box 182, NARA II, hereinafter RG 96. "Government men" is a term that appears often in the letters from applicants. Clients most often used the term to designate administrators and managers of the various relief/rehabilitation efforts. The term "boss" also used in this dissertation appears in the letters and most often refers to project supervisors and social workers. The terms "government men" and "bosses" are terms ubiquitous in the letters of those seeking information or positions. Writers used "Government men" to designate relief and project administrators; the term "boss" is, likewise, applied to clerical personnel, social workers, etc. For New Deal archival sources, for example see: Letters, budgets, etc, WPA Administrative File, UM3 Series 1, Box 4, Folder 3, Special Collections, University of Arkansas Libraries.



Adjustment Administration, created by the Agricultural Adjustment Act (both AAA), and particularly the Cotton Section of that agency, ensured that policies satisfied the sole purpose of supporting and maintaining the economic health and social dominance of large agricultural producers, even when such policies inflicted devastating wounds to the majority of southern cotton growers. The progressive and liberal elements of the New Deal recognized the economic necessity and embraced the moral imperative to relieve, rehabilitate, and redeem poverty-stricken southern agrarians. From that source and via a succession of New Deal agencies, liberals created within the vast New Deal rural rehabilitation and relief efforts over 100 communities in which the government offered an opportunity for carefully selected participants. The Tupelo Homesteads, engendered by the slightly less progressive first New Deal (1933-1935), and Dyess Colony operated under notions propagated by policy makers of the more progressive second New Deal (1935-1939), are two of the three communities under consideration in this dissertation.

Some of the same phenomena that created an environment tolerant of and conducive to bold experimentation within FDR's administration pricked the souls and consciences (and perhaps, the political avarice) of a progressive coalition positioned far to the left of the liberals in the New Deal. Liberal and progressive professional Christians, ostensibly under the intellectual and moral tutelage of, arguably, America's most famous contemporary intellectual, Reinhold Niebuhr, joined forces with the Socialist Party of America and its agents to create the most radical and bold experiment ever conducted on behalf of America's least powerful, most destitute, and thoroughly terrified citizens, southern sharecroppers. That experiment, The Delta Cooperative Farm,

near Hill House, Mississippi, completes the trio of agrarian communities under consideration.

Sometimes clichés are harmless and even useful. Such is the case of the Joe Alexander family with regard to the vicissitudes experienced by cotton growers in the depression-era South. Most often, however, thoughtless clichés are socially acceptable ways of expressing disdain or contempt. Writers H.L. Mencken and Erskine Caldwell, purveyors of gratuitous ridicule and slander, conducted wholesale character assassination to the approval of a large portion of the American reading public, and thus perverted the image of millions of American Southerners, black and white.<sup>4</sup>

As non-satisfying, unproductive, and degrading as are the polemics of Mencken and the rancid caricatures of Caldwell, perhaps even a greater obstacle to understanding and analysis of America's number one economic problem comes from people of progressive notions and vibrant compassion. James Agee and Walker Evans, to great acclaim and praise from high places, introduced a more nuanced and sympathetic image of rural southern agrarians. Unlike Caldwell and Mencken, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is subject to the constraints imposed by good scholarship and common decency. It speaks well of American society that many chose and choose to view the subjects with compassion and generosity. However, such right-minded thinking and compassion also has, in some cases, added to the impedimenta obscuring contemporary views of the

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<sup>4</sup> Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (New York: Grosett and Dunlap, 1932), *passim*. For a representative sample of Mencken's work see: Charles Angoff and H.L. Mencken, "The Worst American State," *American Mercury*, 24 (1931), 1-16, 175-88, 355-71, and anything he wrote about the Scopes Trial from Dayton, Tennessee in 1925. For a scholarly and objective account of that trial see, Edward J. Larsen, *Summer for the Gods, The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), *passim*.

realities of destitute southern agrarians of the depression. As a consequence of good, if limited, scholarship and the attendant desire to show respect and give dignity to this population, certain clichés and stereotypes have emerged that are even more injurious to understanding and analysis. It is these other clichés and stereotypes, propagated for the most part by people of right minds and good hearts that serves as the fulcrum for the thesis of this dissertation. The southern agrarian victims of the depressions are often portrayed as innocent, heroic, noble, and helpless. They were, according to that perspective, foils, and objects only of the designs and actions of their elite bosses. Consideration of the Tupelo Homesteads, Dyess Colony, and Delta Cooperative Farm allows that some of them were noble and heroic; they were not without options and they were not powerless. They made calculated and considered choices; certainly not all of them were innocent.

The conditions of southern sharecroppers and hardscrabble cotton farmers and the opportunity and choices presented in the Tupelo Homesteads, Dyess Colony, and Delta Cooperative Farm is somewhat analogous to the Children of Israel and the Land of Goshen. About 3,000 years ago, the "Land of Goshen" was a place of refuge for the Children of Israel, a place where they could escape the imminent starvation that faced them. In the "best of the land of Egypt," they could prosper under the benevolent paternalism of Brother Joseph and the Pharaoh. Their God promised to nourish and protect them and the Pharaoh would supply furnish for a flat twenty percent of the crop – "on fifths" as a Delta cropper might phrase it. All three of the communities provided a twentieth century parallel to the Land of Goshen, each of them offered a place of refuge and a chance to achieve a life, if not of surfeit, at least of subsistence. The twentieth

century Goshens at Tupelo, Dyess, and Hill House held at least one attribute in common with the Egyptian model, “every form of refuge has its price.”<sup>5</sup>

This dissertation argues that the clients of the three progressive depression-era communities, although weak in economic and political power, abused by the elite and their institutions, and oppressed in spirit and fearful of their futures were not mere foils; they did not abandon their right and obligation to consider, judge, and act within the limits that their circumstances allowed. The menu of choices available to the clients was limited, but all the clients had choices and they exercised choices, and bore the consequences, good and bad, of those choices. In the end, this study explores the beginnings of the Federal government’s rational assault on poverty. By 1932, a sense of emergency and desperation permeated American economic and political thinking. The apparent collapse of the industrial economy and credit markets created an environment in which politicians allowed and the public demanded bold experimentation. The relatively brief period, 1933-1937, in which most of America approved or tolerated progressive notions, offered an opportunity for progressive experimentation. The various “wars” on poverty since the Great Depression have been shaped, in part, by the first attempts of liberal progressives to take advantage of the crises and opportunities of the Great Depression.

Works of Paul Conkin and Donald Holley form the historiographical base for this study. Conkin’s masterful and authoritative *Tomorrow A New World* is a necessarily brief administrative history of one hundred such New Deal communities. The scope of

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<sup>5</sup> Glenn Frye and Don Henley, “Lying Eyes,” *One of These Nights*, Asylum Records Benchmark Music/Kicking Bear Music, ASCAP, 1975.

that work did not allow Conkin to consider individual communities from the perspective of their clients, nor did his study consider efforts outside the New Deal. Donald Holley's *Uncle Sam's Farmers* focuses more sharply on the creation, management, and administration of Region VI (Arkansas, Mississippi, and Louisiana) of the Resettlement Administration (RA). Holley gives significant attention to Dyess Colony but he, like Conkin, does not include a view from the clients. *Uncle Sam's Farmers* gives brief administrative information concerning the Interior Department's Division of Subsistence Housing (DSH) and in that exercise mentions the Tupelo Homesteads and highlights the brief history of its sister project, The Eleanor Roosevelt (McComb, Mississippi) Homesteads.<sup>6</sup>

There exists very little published scholarship on the Tupelo Homesteads and the Delta Cooperative Farm. The paucity of published material on The Tupelo Homesteads and the Delta Cooperative Farm combined with the broad and "top-down" view of the scholarship of Conkin and Holley leaves room for consideration of these projects. "Shadows Over Goshen" takes a more intimate look at these communities and pays attention to the clients and their attitudes and actions.<sup>7</sup>

Each of the three communities drew its clients from the strata of lower and lower-middle class whites. In two of the communities, theorists chose the clientele with specific and assumed class differentiation as a primary qualifier. One project, Delta

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<sup>6</sup> Paul W. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959). Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

<sup>7</sup> Fred C. Smith, "The Tupelo Homesteads: New Deal Agrarian Experimentation," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 68, (2), (Summer 2006): 85-112. For a more complete bibliography, see Chapter 6, footnote 7.

Cooperative Farm, did not select clients; the dispossessed came because they had no other choice.

Three depression-spawned communities, whether a part of or estranged from the larger community, were products, to some degree, of the history of that larger community. Even the one community that became an immediate town with an instant history, Dyess Colony, drew on reservoirs of shared but sometimes divergent cultural preferences and social mores. In two cases, Dyess Colony and Delta Cooperative Farm, the peculiar economic and cultural constraints imposed by the Delta required that the clients produce cotton. In the other community, the Tupelo Homesteads, the lack of such crop and organization imperatives hastened the end of the experiment. The Tupelo community was a product of the First New Deal; Dyess Colony, technically organized under the aegis of the “first” New Deal, reorganized and operated under the “second” New Deal. Delta Cooperative Farm, the last and most romantic-radical of all, was the issue of the union of the Socialists and churchmen.

At Tupelo, according to historian Donald Holley, Mississippi’s best example of a New South city, lower middle-class whites who were providentially and temporarily in straightened circumstances due to forces mostly beyond their control were invited to place a portion of their personal sovereignty on the altar of cooperation as sacrifice in exchange for a lower middle-class, life-long indenture. The New Deal offered middle-class white folks a chance to own a subsistence homestead.<sup>8</sup>

At Dyess, Arkansas, the Second New Deal offered a slightly reduced reward for those who were willing to trade a measure of independence and a generous helping of

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<sup>8</sup> Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, 54.

deference for the security of life-long subsistence yeomanry. The Second New Deal included in its objectives rehabilitation of the dispossessed, not merely their relief. The \$4.8 billion appropriation that funded the Works Progress Administration (WPA) also funded, and by Executive Order established, a dedicated assault on rural poverty, the Resettlement Administration (RA). The typical Colonist at the Dyess Colony, according to the preferences of Second New Deal bosses, was demonstrably lower class - preferably of the upper lower class. The "blanks" or forms used by the government men that granted entrance to the colony endeavored to ensure that Dyess Colonists be among the very best of the failures. If a prospective family survived the winnowing of blanks and government men, they were assumed to be of a cooperative spirit. Dyess Colony offered failed farmers a chance to own a subsistence farm.

At Delta Cooperative Farm, the alliance of Christians and Socialists received those that would come; those who did were the most abjectly poor and terrified white and black people in the country. The sacrifice demanded of the Cooperators was more sacrificial; taxes and oblations are always most severe for the very poor.

The larger canvass – the more enthralling and problematic observation – is that of the people who were the Homesteaders, the Colonists, the Cooperators. About 18 million people lived in the non-urban South; of those 5.5 million whites and almost 3 million African Americans cultivated someone else's land – mostly cotton land. Fully one-half of the Southern farmers were tenant farmers; half of those tenants were sharecroppers. This dissertation has the main eye on the dispossessed whites of the South. In literature they are ignored, for the most part, in favor of white elites and black sharecroppers; they

are almost invisible in the scholarly literature of the 1920s. Such literary attention as they receive portrays them as degraded, pitiful, and amoral.<sup>9</sup>

Not all of the South's dispossessed whites were tenants, or even farmers. Some who became tenants and cultivators as a function of the depression that began at least as early as 1920 cultivated cotton or truck patches because it was their only option. Some college educated, technically trained, and socially adept whites lost their middle-class status with the disappearance of their middle-class jobs. While each community sought to alleviate the depression in the lives of a distinct class strata and despite (sometimes) wildly differing notions of governance and economic philosophy, they had some attributes in common. All drew from a resume of progressive ideas, the most applicable coming from the robust transfer of notions that Daniel T. Rogers has labeled, famously, *Atlantic Crossings*. All three projects made agriculture their economic centerpiece, and all three demanded "cooperation" or "cooperative spirit" as the primary qualifier for inclusion. There were, of course, significant differences. All Homesteaders, Colonists, and Cooperators bargained under the heavy duress of the Great Depression; their rescuers applied a gentle and subtle duress in order to induce, cajole, convince the Homesteaders, Colonists, and Cooperators to cooperate and prove the validity of the particular strain of gospel preached by the bosses.

Chapter I is a consideration of the confluence of geography, society, and culture. Chapter II identifies the strands of progressive social thought and economic theory and the speculation that provided foundations for all three projects. Chapter III treats the

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<sup>9</sup> Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 7-8; Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 5-8;



subsistence homesteads and the Homesteaders at Tupelo. Chapter IV examines the construction and politics of Dyess Colony; Chapter V examines life at Dyess and the choices available and those taken by the Colonists. Chapter VI is the story of America's most radical and, perhaps, most promising of all the communitarian efforts. Chapter VII is conclusion and application.

## CHAPTER I

### AMERICAN GOSHEN

*You shall dwell in the land of Goshen . . .  
Also, do not be concerned for your goods, for the best of the land of  
Egypt is yours . . .  
And at harvest you shall give a fifth to Pharaoh and four-fifths shall be  
your own . . .  
And Joseph made it a statute concerning the land of Egypt valid to this  
day, that Pharaoh should have the fifth . . .* Genesis 45:10; 23-26 circa  
2500 B.C.E.

*The alluvial plain is, in an agricultural respect, one of the most  
important formations . . . in all the southern states; nay, more than that,  
even in the United States. . . it is still a wilderness; the prejudice of its  
unfitness for cultivation has only lately subsided, and the axe of the  
wood-man scarcely begun its ravages; but after the lapse of another  
century, whatever the Delta of the Nile may have been, will only be a  
shadow of what the alluvial plain of the Mississippi will then be. It will  
be the central point – the garden spot of the North American continent –  
where wealth and prosperity culminate.* E.N. Lowe, Mississippi State  
Geologist, 1857.<sup>1</sup>

By Inauguration Day 1933, the American agricultural depression was twelve years old. The continuing decline of agricultural prices and the concentration of land into ever-larger units of production, the absence of a robust foreign market, the tariff-enhanced high prices for manufactured goods, the diluted political power of about half of the rural white populace, and the practical absence of it among blacks posed peculiar difficulties for the New Deal. Added to the fundamental economic problems, the American *mentalité* of the 1920s had embraced the euphoria induced by prosperity. Flappers, corporate welfare, roaring industrial production, time-purchase contracts, and

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted: Robert L. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South: A History of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta from Reconstruction to the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967): 29.

the coronation of business and businessmen had coalesced into a *Modern Temper*, the “jazz age.” By 4 March 1933, the United States had crossed that ill-defined psycho-economic line that separated recurring American depressions or “panics” from a “Great” one. By winter of 1932-33, the United States had crossed into an era of economic and industrial malaise in which it seemed that market forces had abandoned the application of the “unseen hand” of market and industrial rationality. President Herbert Hoover had been remarkably aggressive, innovative, and daring in his attempt to assuage what had become a worldwide conundrum. He had also been remarkably ineffective. The distinction between “depression” and the Great Depression was not one of mere semantics.<sup>2</sup>

The realization that the depression of 1930 was no ordinary panic and that the self-correcting attributes of modern capitalism showed little signs of applying a correction goaded President Hoover into applying aggressive and unparalleled government action. In spite of Hoover’s fairly radical departure from economic convention, Americans used his name as a mocking, bitter slogan; the depression was still *Hoovering* around, empty pockets turned inside out were *Hoover flags*, old newspapers used by park-bench sleepers were *Hoover blankets*. By the conventions of the day and in accordance with traditional Republican notions of “normalcy,” Hoover

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<sup>2</sup> Lynn Dumenil, *Modern Temper: American Culture and Society in the 1920s* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995), *passim*. Gilbert C. Fite, *Cotton Fields no More: Southern Agriculture, 1865-1980* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), 67-91. David M. Kennedy, *Freedom From Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1999), *passim*. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), *passim*. Michael E. Parrish, *Anxious Decades: America in Prosperity and Depression, 1920-1941* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992), *passim*.

became increasingly aggressive and unorthodox as the aberrant nature of the Great Depression became increasingly apparent and painful. Even as President Hoover ratcheted up government intrusion into the economy, the Great Depression was accelerating. In Europe and the Far East, the economic catastrophes made the political economies of Germany, Italy, and Japan prone to nationalistic frenzy, military aggrandizement, and a quest for autarchy. The “Dark Valley” through which the world’s people traveled resolved into world war and a decidedly more complicated world.<sup>3</sup>

The pace of Hoover’s willingness to change his mind and insert the government into business affairs did not keep pace with the ever-increasing realization of the extent and magnitude of the Great Depression. Yet, some of the notions given fuller form in President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal had their origins in Hoover; some of the ideas propagated by FDR were eerily similar in substance to those previously suggested by the Great Engineer. Not only were the skeletons of some of the more radical New Deal programs suggested and implemented by Hoover’s administration, both men were prone to issue non-sense nostrums in order to create or preserve confidence and instill hope in the American psyche. “No one has actually starved,” said Hoover, when in fact New York hospitals affirmed that several had died of that malady. “One hobo got three meals in one day,” he noted, assuring Americans that things were not so bad as some believed. When in December 1930, the International Apple Shipper’s Association decided to sell apples on credit to unemployed men, the now-famous depression era icon of apple sellers appeared on city streets. Hoover interpreted this phenomena in a most

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<sup>3</sup> For an excellent commentary and analysis of the magnitude and power of the depression worldwide, particularly its effect on society and government see: Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: a Panorama of the 1930s* (New York: Random House, 2000).

positive manner. "Many people have left their jobs for the more profitable one of selling apples," he said. Most notoriously, he announced that business conditions were fundamentally sound in the wake of the disintegration of the American credit and securities markets. Thaumaturgy comprised the bulk of Hoover's public pronouncements about the depression, its depth, and prospects of recovery; recovery only needed the restoration of confidence. Hoover's initiatives, many of them modified by the New Deal, included the Glass-Steagall Banking Act, the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC), and the Federal Farm Board. The New Deal modified all three of the issues; securities regulation, mortgage liquidity, and agricultural surpluses. Initially even President Roosevelt seemed to mirror Hoover's faith in orthodox economic and social theory. FDR promised to balance and to cut the national budget. He did that, in part, by reducing servicemen's pensions. It is ironic that Hoover's refusal to accommodate the Bonus Army and George Patton's attack on patriotic Americans, in FDR's opinion, sealed the 1932 presidential election for him. The new President was also prone to non sense thaumaturgic statements. Addressing a hopeful but anxious nation, FDR told it that, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself," a misstatement of facts as enormous as any that Hoover ever made. The difference was that the nation believed Roosevelt.<sup>4</sup>

While the 1920s roared with the hum of increasing industrial production, corporate profits fueled further efficiencies of production, and while much of America reveled in the *zeitgeist* of the jazz age, the scientists and technicians associated with agricultural colleges, extension services, and experiment stations introduced hybrid seed,

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<sup>4</sup> Hoover's quotations are taken from, William Manchester, *The Glory and the Dream: a Narrative History of American, 1932-1972* (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1973), 26, 4-43. Manchester is sharply critical of Hoover, for a contrasting view see David M. Kennedy, *The American People in Depression and War*, 43-130.

technology, and the scientific application of both. Just as in industry, agricultural production increased dramatically while the labor required to produce it fell precipitously. As Ogden Mills, Hoover, and Andrew Mellon presided over a spectacular industrial boom and the initial phases of its even more spectacular decline, agribusiness sought a way to restore the prosperity of American agriculture.<sup>5</sup>

The spectacular Wall Street crash, the dramatic tales of urban fear and poverty, and the jeremiads of the popular press focused the attention of the nation on the Great Depression as an urban and business phenomenon. For twelve years southern cotton cultivators, tenants and small farmers, had been effectively ignored as the agricultural depression methodically translated the small yeoman cotton farmer into landless cotton cultivators. Only as the nation felt the intensity of a “great” depression did the dispossessed of the South command the attention of politicians and policy makers. For twelve years the agricultural depression had inexorably ground the expectations of the great majority of agricultural workers and small farmers into ephemeral hopes. Hope delayed, like justice, is often no hope at all. In the South, particularly in the old Confederate states and specifically in the cotton-South, eight million destitute and docile citizens, “half starved black and white” wrote Lorena Hickock, “struggle in competition

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<sup>5</sup> Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 76-78, 183, 223-224; David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to New Deal: American Farm Policy From Hoover to Roosevelt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 9-10, 33, 67, 149; Elizabeth Sanders, *Roots of Reform: Farmers, Workers, and the American State, 1877-1917* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 314-24, 328-30, 340, 388.

for less to eat than my dog gets at home, for the privilege of living in huts that are infinitely less comfortable than his kennel.”<sup>6</sup>

All three of the communities in this study were born of political desperation but in two vastly different “cotton-south” economic environments. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH) located the Tupelo Homesteads in a region that embraced New South commerce and industry. Dyess Colony and Delta Cooperative Farm were bound both mentally and economically to the Delta. The region’s debilitating economic dependence on 100-foot-deep topsoil and vulnerability to natural cataclysms moderated the limits of radical experimentation. This chapter introduces the two distinct geo-economic environments and the depression-induced desperation that allowed experimentation and suggested that some people should modify their economic aspirations. Two of the communities under consideration shared common geophysical and cultural environment; that environment accounted for the location of the communities. The economy and culture of Dyess and Delta were, in large measure, a function of a common geophysical environment, that of the Great American Delta. Tupelo’s development was more a function of circumstance.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Lorena Hickock to Harry Hopkins, 11 June 1934, Hopkins Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

<sup>7</sup> “Great American Delta” signifies the entirety of the Mississippi River alluvial basin. It includes 66 counties and parishes within Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, and most familiarly, the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), uses the term “delta” to describe the Yazoo-Mississippi basin. This very influential book has created confusion. Popular understanding of the term “delta” confines it to Mississippi. The expanse of delta in Arkansas, for example, is much larger than in Mississippi. Delta land in Missouri, Arkansas, and Louisiana is of the same fecundity and is as “problematic” as that of the Yazoo-Mississippi basin.

Tupelo had grown from a village prior to the Civil War into a bustling little regional cotton shipment center and mill-town by the 1930s. It was not particularly favored in terms of natural resources over any of the other villages in northeast Mississippi. An insignificant village at the end of the Civil War, the town grew as a function of its relative location, situated about halfway between Birmingham and Memphis and at the intersection of north-south and east-west railroads. By the onset of the Great Depression, Tupelo was a minor manufacturing center and cotton depot for the area and boasted a population of about 6,000. It owed its growth and development, primarily, to its strategic location. It also had powerful advocates in the U.S. Congress and Senate. The President depended on the support of Congressman John Rankin of Tupelo and Mississippi Senator Pat Harrison (Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee) in accomplishing the New Deal legislation. Such cooperation, and an attempt to reward it, may account for the surprisingly robust presence of the New Deal in Mississippi. The New Deal came to Tupelo more emphatically, perhaps, than to any other Mississippi city due to the influence and prestige of Mississippians, particularly that of Pat Harrison. In addition to the Tupelo Homesteads, the Roosevelt administration established the Natchez Trace Parkway, and most famously, made Tupelo the first city served by the Tennessee Valley Authority. Tupelo's development was a function of politics and location. Northeast Mississippi was typical of much of the inland South. There were few grand vistas and the climate, while temperate, was neither particularly brutal nor particularly pleasant; it was, in the vernacular, just tolerable. The landscape



and conditions were moderate and unremarkable. The Tupelo Homesteaders did not have to contend with the Delta. The Delta was different.<sup>8</sup>

From a geologic point of view, the Delta is new ground. The combined effects of time, glaciations, and the meandering Mississippi River dug a gently sloping (toward the south) and slightly tilted (to the east) basin. While the slope of the basin is gentle, the declination from the bluffs that compass the Delta – Arkansas bluffs to the west, Missouri bluffs to the north, and Mississippi bluffs to the east – to the basin floor is severe. For millennia, the Mississippi River and a few of its tributaries have been filling in that basin of almost 12.7 million acres; it is almost exactly the same size as the Mekong Delta of Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> The area drained by the Mississippi and its principal tributaries, the Ohio and the Missouri, is huge – amounting to about 41 per cent of the area of the contiguous states. Every year the runoff from this wide area made its way to the Mississippi River. Just South of Cape Girardeau, the character of the Mississippi undergoes a significant transition. There the river broadens, slows, and begins its section of writhing, twisting, loops, turns, and bends; soil suitable for apples in northwest New York mingles with the ground that supported corn in Iowa and wheat in Kansas and Montana. It is also where the Delta begins.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999), 20-67; Martha Swain, *The New Deal Years*, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1978), *passim*.

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.easysurf.cc/cnver5.htm#acr6>, accessed 7 May 2007. The total acreage is determined by converting the core Delta counties land mass in square miles to acres.

<sup>10</sup> Mikko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Flood Plain* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005): 27. The poetic and

Memories of the terrible flood of 1927 form contemporary consciousness of Mississippi River flooding. Visions of pitiful, huddling masses; the efforts of an entire nation to provide relief; and stories of heroism, mendacity, self-sacrifice, churlishness, and despair remind that the river is a beast. It seems that the river lies in wait until it draws people and money into its maws and then wages its awesome assault on humans and their institutions. As recent phenomena and reactions to them suggest, contemporary humans are wise to be afraid of the river.<sup>11</sup>

From the beginning it was not so. In spring, the river system began an elegant ballet. When rain or snow fell in prodigious amounts and under very common conditions, the river swelled and roared, its banks teeming and the water rolling, roiling, roaring, riotously tearing off sections of its bank, snapping huge trees like match sticks and creating whirlpools and counter-currents. As the Mississippi rose, it stalled the water rushing from tributaries. The Arkansas, St. Francis, and Yazoo rivers, carrying flood-

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memorable definition of the Mississippi Delta as beginning "... in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg" by David Cohn is unfortunate. Cohn was hyper-provincial. He willingly ignored the, in some cases more, ubiquitous Delta attributes in Arkansas than in the Mississippi-Yazoo Delta; David Cohn, *Where I was Born and Raised* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1948), 12.

<sup>11</sup> The American Red Cross, *The Mississippi Valley Flood Disaster of 1927: Official report of Relief Operations* (Washington, D.C.: The American Red Cross, John Baton Payne, Chairman, no pub. given): *passim*; Pete Daniel, *Deepen' as it Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977): *passim*; John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985): *passim*. As planters tried to provide protection from the more-or-less regular flooding, they altered the ecosystem by building levees. The levees, of course simply diverted the flood into more powerful streams. As the Delta developed, levee building exploded. Semi-public regional levee boards, state commissions, and finally, the federal government sought to tame the river. Of course the more "control" the more astounding and devastating were the resultant floods. Significant Mississippi River floods since 1880 occurred in 1892, 1897, 1903, 1912, 1913, 1923, 1927, and 1937.

stage volumes and unable to relieve the pressure in the Mississippi River, imposed similar constraints on their tributaries. Thus the Coldwater, Deer Creek, Little Tallahatchie, L'Anguille, Big Sunflower, White, Tyronza, Bayou Bartholomew, Cache, Bayou DeView, Black, Ouachita, Tensas, and hundreds of their own tributary creeks and streams also roared and rolled, and roiled and finally, the climax! Nevertheless, these pre-human encroachment eruptions were mild and gentle – floodwater inexorably made its way to the lowest level – for the ecosystem was self-regulating. The low natural levees did not crash in defeat at the pressure of a tumultuous flood; they merely submitted to the inevitable. The flood flowed over the natural levees. The main rivers, especially the Mississippi, had natural floodways and alternate courses for the water. The rivers and streams relieved themselves by gently releasing water over the natural levees formed by previous floods. As the water spread and covered the basin, it slowed, and as it slowed, it laid deposits from the literal and ultimate “land bank” of continental America. The larger and heavier sediment fell first, along the borders of the stream, the lighter silt made its way toward the interior of the basin. When the water receded, the land along the banks was higher and all the earth so covered was richer.

Moreover, the rivers moved. The Mississippi changed its channel and created islands and ox-bow lakes. Within the bluff-ringed basin, the river moved east – sidled west – and then started the whole process all over. In springtime flood, before man's dramatic alteration of the environment, the Delta – from its northern extent in Missouri to its termination in Concordia Parish, Louisiana – must have shimmered in the warm sun as

the rays reflected from the watery expanse, an inland sea. It may have been beautiful to behold; no one knows.<sup>12</sup>

Delta terrain is mirage inducing. The scoured-out basin, continually self-leveling, and flat as the human eye can discern, is actually quite an undulating surface. When rivers and streams changed their courses – as they moved laterally across the Delta – they left sediments behind. The heavier sediments formed the natural levees and ridge lands, making them quicker to dry and to produce. Unnoticed by the unaided eye, the Delta is laced with ribbons of embankments, old levees, and abandoned creek banks; these raised ribbons are arrayed parallel with the streams (or parallel with past streams), thus they run (mostly) southeast throughout the Delta. In that portion of the Delta west of the Mississippi River, the prevailing winds drove particles of loam against the barely perceptible ridges and levees and formed sand ridges. Thus in the midst of the low Delta basin one encounters oddities such as the Sikeston Ridge in Missouri. An even more anomalous structure, Crowley's Ridge sliced diagonally across the Delta from Missouri to Helena, Arkansas. Although most of the sand ridges of the Delta are located in Missouri and Arkansas, Dogwood Ridge extending from Coahoma to Holmes County in Mississippi, separates the flood plains of the Sunflower and Yazoo Rivers. This ridge,

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<sup>12</sup> For instances of physicists and mathematicians using “imagine a ...” Denis Brian, *Einstein: A Life* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1996), *passim*. Paul Hoffman, *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers: the Story of Paul Erdős and the Search for Mathematical Truth* (New York: Hyperion, 1998), *passim*. For the tilt and slope of the Delta see: Meko Saikku, *This Delta, This Land: An Environmental History of the Yazoo-Mississippi Flood Plain* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 26-51; Jeanie Wayne and Willard B. Gatewood, eds, *The Arkansas Delta: Land of Paradox* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 3; Robert L. Brandfon, *Cotton Kingdom of the New South: A History of the Yazoo Mississippi Delta from Reconstruction to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967); James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, 3.

two to eight miles wide, is the only place in the Delta where the dogwood tree is indigenous. Dogwoods are not flood tolerant and prefer well-drained soils. These unexpected relatively high plateaus provide visual relief to the landscape and a dollop of sandy loam soil different in nature to the alluvial soils of the rest of the Delta. On most maps, these “fingers” of ridges and plateaus are shaded to note elevation; the Arkansas and Missouri portions of the Delta appear to be less robust according to the shading marking elevation. On U.S. continental maps, typically used as background for televised weather reports, the physical expanse of the Great American Delta is apparent. The shading allocated to the sand ridges of Arkansas and Missouri makes the color demarking those counties less vibrant and robust.<sup>13</sup>

#### Delta Development

According to environmentalist Mikko Saikko, the subtle changes in topography are profound: “elevational change of a couple of inches creates distinctively different hydrologic conditions, soils, and biotic communities.”<sup>14</sup> The apparently flat Delta terrain is actually composed of a series of gently sloping valleys. In some Delta “valleys,” the outlining parallel ridges might only be a few feet higher than the valley floor, and the ridges miles distant. Thus, the valleys in the inner Delta resulted in a terrain that was undulating, not bumpy. The valley sides, or “ridge lands,” offered an advantage over the valley bottoms. The ridges and the sloping sides were quicker to drain and dry, thus, quicker to produce cotton. The soil was ineluctably rich loam and clays. In the interior

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<sup>13</sup> Saikko, *This Delta, This Land*, 26-31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 35. For a thorough and helpful discussion of the undulating character of the Delta, the nature of flooding, and weather patterns, and other Delta commonalities, see: Saikko, 23-51.

of the Delta in the low-lying areas, the flood deposited its finest granules of agricultural gold. In the nineteenth century, agriculturalists would call this rich lowland clay “buckshot”; farmers since that time have cursed and praised it. Buckshot is rich but aggravating. Its consistency when wet was almost like liquid paste and the mud was aggressive; it tried to swallow whatever came near. In the drought of late summer buckshot shattered into sharp-sided cracks and crevasses in the earth. One Arkansas folk-tale involves a farmer that claimed he lost two mules in one year. One of them drowned in spring when he mired in the mud; the other one fell in a crack in August and had not been heard from since, he said.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the hard times and financial difficulties, in the period 1890-1925, the Delta population increased rapidly. Some of that growth was provoked by the enticing, but not necessarily truthful, recruitment efforts by cotton barons.<sup>16</sup> In December 1895, E.P. Skene, Land Commissioner (presumably for the Illinois Central Railroad Company) issued an impressive sales brochure. The company offered to sell Delta land in forty-acre sections for as low as \$7.00 an acre, with only 20 percent down and the rest financed over six years at 6 percent annual interest. To make sure that prospective buyers understood what a chance in a lifetime this sale represented, the brochure hastened to clear up some misunderstandings. Mississippi Delta land was far superior in yield and profit to

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<sup>15</sup> I have heard the tale about the farmer and his lost mules since childhood. For references to “buckshot,” or “gumbo” see: Margaret Jones Bolsterli, *Born in the Delta: Reflections on the Making of a Southern White Sensibility* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991): 5; Paul K. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959): 137; Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South*, 159.

<sup>16</sup> “Cotton Barons” and alternatively “cotton aristocracy” designates the powerful actors associated with cotton production and includes bankers, publicists, factors, gin owners transportation executives as well as planters, managers, and scientists.

agricultural lands in Iowa, Illinois, and Indiana. In Iowa, average land cost was \$23.52 per acre and each acre yielded crops worth an average of \$6.85. In Illinois, the figures were \$38.65 and \$7.85 respectively; in Indiana, they were \$45.66 and \$8.23. The average land value in Mississippi was \$17.21 and the average money product was \$12.21 per acre. By this ratio, said Skene, the Illinois Central Land was easily worth \$50.00 per acre. The brochure quickly reminded that its land was located in the Yazoo Valley, an area far more productive than any of the state averages, and this land could be obtained for as little as \$7.00 per acre. Skene warned that these conditions could not last. "Mississippi will soon double or treble its population by the addition of thrifty, industrious immigrants, possessed of some capital; the price of lands will then, no doubt, increase to something like a real value."<sup>17</sup>

Other misinformation, thought Skene, needed correction. An Episcopal Bishop "proved" by census information that the Mississippi Delta was healthier than Missouri, Tennessee, Texas, Kentucky, Georgia, Indiana, Kansas, Illinois, Alabama, and Colorado. Another Episcopalian averred, "As to malaria, that is more to be dreaded in a week on the Hudson than in all our borders in a lifetime."<sup>18</sup> If one needed wage work while starting his crop operations, one could easily, said Skene, acquire work in one of the many area sawmills. Good water was only a matter of driving a pipe about forty-five feet and the taxes were expected to average about seven cents per acre. However, the most important correction came toward the end of the brochure. "NO OVERFLOW (sic) from the

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<sup>17</sup> "Railroad Lands for Sale Owned by the Yazoo & Mississippi Railroad Co. in the Famous Yazoo Valley of Mississippi," (Illinois Central Railroad Company: Chicago, Illinois, December, 1896), 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, 9.

Mississippi River need ever be feared, as the levees built and maintained by the State are on the best approved system now known.”<sup>19</sup> In the space of thirty-one pages Skene demonstrated that unless one was rich and contented, one must be an idiot to ignore a chance to buy the richest land in the world at an inconsequential price.

Other efforts to promote the Delta continued throughout the first quarter of the twentieth century. The Southern Alluvial Land Association did not have land to sell. The association’s purpose was to “place on these lands desirable farmers and settlers.”<sup>20</sup> In 1919, the association published its appeal for delta development. “The Call of the Alluvial Empire” was a state-by-state expose of the Alluvial Empire, an area almost exactly congruent with the Great American Delta. The Southern Alluvial Land Association was a bit more sober than was E. P. Skene. By 1919, most people knew that topsoil 100 feet deep is not necessarily a guarantee of perpetual fertility. A cotton plant’s root system can procure nutrients only to a depth of about seven inches. However, in the Delta, those seven inches might be more than enough. F. D. Beneke, the association’s secretary, addressed that issue in his contribution:

Scientific data discloses that there is enough phosphorous in alluvial soil to produce more than one hundred crops of cotton, nearly one hundred crops of corn, and sixty to eighty years of other standard crops before exhausting the present supply, and this from the first seven inches of soil. Each succeeding inch yields sufficient additional supply for one to several decades, according to the kind of crops raised. The money properly spent for fertilizer alone on a northern farm would buy an alluvial farm.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, 27.

<sup>20</sup> “The Call of the Alluvial Empire,” (Southern Alluvial Land Association: Memphis, TN, 1919), 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 7.



Extolling the variety of commercial crops amenable to climate and soil, the association was also quick to disabuse people of fear of malaria or of the river. With apologies to T.P. Skene and his Episcopalian witnesses, there was considerably more malaria in the Great American Delta than there was in the Hudson River Valley. Dr. William Kraus, in his contribution to "The Call of the Alluvial Empire" was more measured in his report. Drainage had dramatically reduced the incidence of malaria. In December of 1915, there were 100 sick calls for malaria in Cross County, Arkansas; in December of 1916, there were four. Civil Engineer L.L. Hidinger was also more moderate in his comments about flood control, yet confident. "The levees have now been brought to a height above any high water that has ever occurred and their width and thickness has been increased so that today the levee system stands as a great earthen dam bordering each bank of the river and capable of holding its own against the greatest floods."<sup>22</sup>

The development efforts of the Illinois Central Railroad and the Southern Alluvial Land Association were directed at middling and prosperous white folks. One of the testimonials in the Illinois Central brochure came from a farmer in Illinois who moved to the Delta. He bought 1,540 acres for which he paid \$38,500. He prospered.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the opportunity costs, there were ways in which plain folks might make a place in the Delta. Desperate for labor to clear land, drain swamps, and raise cotton, Delta planters offered opportunities for plain folks, especially black plain folks, to own land. Often these acquisitive and commercially minded plain blacks sought areas close to un-improved acreage. They were often able to obtain title to acreage by swapping their

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

labor to the landlord in exchange for un-improved land. By 1910, blacks owned about two-thirds of the farms in the Mississippi Delta; the improved acreage in those farms was miniscule.

Until the advent of the war-induced agricultural depression of the 1920s, plain whites, for the most part, did not try to farm the Delta. They were and remained a distinct minority. The depression revealed some of the horrible conditions and impossible obstacles to attaining yeoman status in the South. In the course of the agricultural depression and the Great Depression that succeeded it, Americans were urged to adopt aspirations foreign to American ideology. Things changed rapidly after 1930, conditions, ideas, and policies that were mysterious and vague to Delta cotton cultivators, black and white, controlled and defined their lives. Pressures they did not understand and forces over which they had no control increasingly determined the economic fate of the plain whites of the Delta.

The New Deal came to the New South before it came to the cotton south. M.L. Wilson's notion of subsistence gardening as a necessary component of income in support a middle-class lifestyle, promised to remove the sting of reduced industrial wages. The best and most orthodox of Wilson's decidedly unorthodox notions, the most successful of any of the 100 New Deal agrarian communities, was in the Mississippi hill country about six miles from Tupelo, Mississippi.

## CHAPTER II

### FREDERICK JACKSON TURNER REVISTED – THE SEARCH FOR A NEW ECONOMIC FRONTIER

**“Wearing away the prime of life in a country that can boast as many evils as hell itself.”** Cousin to James Franklin Smith<sup>1</sup>

**“But there are lots of things better than growing exceedingly rich and one of them is having the assurance of a competence, of a sufficient living, of a good life and good neighbors. You boys have a mighty fine chance at that assured life.”** FDR, May 1934<sup>2</sup>

In a paper presented to the American Historical Association in 1893, Frederick Jackson Turner proclaimed the end of a definite era of American History; the American frontier, he said, was closed. Parts of the Great American Delta were isolated and almost as remote, in practical terms, as were areas noted for their frontier isolation. In the spring of 1878, twelve years before the Superintendent of the Census revealed the data upon which Turner built his thesis, James Franklin Smith of Coffeeville, MS, received a remarkable letter. The letter was from his cousin who lived on a new farm along the Big Sunflower River, about forty miles distant as the crow flies and the author offers powerful testimony about the frontier isolation. “Cousin” complained of the lack of society and conveniences. Living only about fifty miles from the Mississippi River, Cousin found the conditions in the interior of the Delta as lonely and dangerous as those confronting settlers on the western frontier. Despite such pockets of frontier-like

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<sup>1</sup> Letter addressed to “Dear Cousin,” dated March 28, 1878, Leigh’s Landing, MS. The letter is in possession of Dr. James W. Smith, Greenville, MS; copy retained by author. James Franklin Smith’s own plantation now lies in the middle of Grenada Lake, itself a legacy of Great American Delta flood control.

<sup>2</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 2, *Year of Crises* (New York: Random House, 1938), 320.

isolation within the heartland, the frontier, said Turner, was closed and no longer provided the safety valve and social opportunities that had formed the American character. American society, his thesis implied, had to find new mechanisms for controlling and channeling excess people, energy, and ambitions.<sup>3</sup>

The superintendent of the 1890 census noted that he could no longer find a continuous line beyond which the population decreased to fewer than two per square mile. Turner considered that fact and from it developed his widely known, often debated, but influential frontier thesis. Turner wrote, "The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advances of American settlement westward explain American development." According to Turner, it was to the frontier that the American intellect, "... owes its striking characteristics That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and acquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in the artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil, and with all that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom – these are the traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the frontier." In the 1920s and 1930s, economists, policy makers, and politicians saw evidence that the economy of the United States indeed faced limits imposed by the disappearing frontier of American industrial consumerism.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History*, (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1920). Mary Hamilton, *Trials of the Earth: The Autobiography of Mary Hamilton*, Helen Davis Dick, ed., forward by Ellen Douglas, (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992): *passim*.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

While some New Deal policy makers and activists sought to rationalize American agriculture, others suggested modifications to traditional American notions of industrial productivity and personal economic aspirations. As economists struggled with defining parity and planning for an altered world-economy, many Americans began to reconsider “back to the land” notions. Such willingness to modify and to reconsider were products of the depression. Further justification for use of “great” to designate the depression beginning in 1929 is the first consideration of this chapter.

In the decade 1919-1929, without an increase in the work force, industrial productivity rose by over 100 percent; real income rose a comparatively scant twenty-two percent. Industrialists struggled to find markets for the output of increasingly productive facilities, while the work force producing this abundance, through the seduction of advertising and the advent of time-purchase contracts, reached the limits of consumerism. Soft demand for industrial goods actuated a severe reduction in employment and dramatically reduced wages. In 1929, industrial wages in the United States averaged \$25 (\$294) a week; by 1932 the average weekly industrial wage had fallen to \$17 (\$250). Fully one fourth of the national work force was unemployed in 1932, and the heavily industrial Midwest and Northeast experienced unemployment pockets as high as 90 percent.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The figure in parentheses are the 2006 equivalent of the immediately preceding figure. William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-32*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 179-180. Industrial production increased from an index of 58 in 1921 to 110 in 1929 (1933-39 = 100). Leuchtenburg gives an insightful overview for the reasons for this productivity: Taylorism; the replacement of steam engines with electric motors; advertising induced consumerism; and other innovations. Roger Biles, *A New Deal for the American People* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1991), 11. The figures in parentheses are equivalent present value figures.

Scholarly investigation of the Great Depression necessarily involves the consideration of income and prices. Because of inflation, monetary policy, and myriad other factors, a vast differential exists between the purchasing power of the 1933 dollar and that of the twenty-first century. Consequently, repeated references to depression era dollars often present problems in analysis. First, such references obscure the degree of disparity that existed among different levels of wealth and poverty. For example, a \$400 differential in 1933 is equivalent to a \$6,222 differential in 2006 real dollars. A difference in income of \$6,222 per year among families in the sixty to seventy thousand dollar range is significant but hardly catastrophic. A \$400 differential among farm families in 1933 meant that one family lived in poverty while the other enjoyed middle class status. Secondly, the very degree of poverty or wealth is often understated by use of depression era dollars as a means of comparison. The scholarly literature on the Great Depression is filled with references to five-cent cotton and family incomes of \$200 per year. Such repeated references can easily induce a familiarity that, in itself, serves to diminish appreciation of psychological, social, and political pressures. Familiarity with the paucity of prices received and paid by the dispossessed is offset by a parallel in consideration of the payments received by big time producers. As part of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) crop reduction campaign of 1933, the Delta Pine and Land Company headquartered in Scott, Mississippi, received \$114,800. In 2006 dollars, this rich government dole translates to almost \$1.8 million. To illustrate this largess another way, consider: the 1933 AAA payment was large enough to purchase seven farms the size of the one established at the Delta Cooperative Farm.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity*, Cambridge: (Oxford University Press, 1992), 192-193.

Industrialists looked longingly toward those foreign markets that had proven so lucrative in the Great War and immediately thereafter. Unfortunately, for them, revitalization of war-torn industries in Europe and the economic nationalism of worldwide tariff policy served to close the foreign economic frontier for American industries. Europe, still America's largest trading partner, no longer provided an all-consuming market for excess American production.<sup>7</sup>

As the factories produced goods that Americans could neither consume at home nor sell abroad, the mining industries also produced a surplus in search of a new frontier. In 1923, U.S. coal concerns operated 9,331 commercial mines with an annual capacity of 970 million tons. The United States consumed its largest yearly amount of coal at the height of World War I – 579 million tons. No market and no frontier demanded the excesses of coal and other minerals produced by American mining productivity.<sup>8</sup>

Not only were American manufactures and extractions looking for a home, agricultural products also needed a market. The “pull” of profitable wartime opportunities and government inducements had resulted in a dramatic increase in agricultural production. Farmers had brought marginal land into production, applied technology with fertilizer, and taken advantage of the prices influenced by European war-related shortages. The price of cotton, for example, had risen from thirteen-cents a pound in 1913 to thirty-eight cents a pound in 1919.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 179-180; Biles, *A New Deal*, 10-12.

<sup>8</sup> The mining production figures are taken from: Phillip M. Glick, “The Federal Subsistence Homesteads,” *Yale Law Journal*, 44 (June 1935): 1325.

<sup>9</sup> Leuchtenburg, *Perils of Prosperity*, 100-02.

Agricultural prices and incomes had decreased dramatically at the beginning of the 1920s. The World War had imposed artificiality on the development of American agriculture as American farmers greatly expanded production in order to meet wartime demands of home and Allies. Between 1914 and 1919, wheat acreage increased from about 48 million to over 75 million acres. With increased production and higher prices, the cotton crop of 1919 brought a record \$2 billion and gross farm income that year reached \$17 billion. Overall, with notable exceptions, particularly among the cotton cultivators, farmers enjoyed a fairly comfortable existence during the five year halcyon period.<sup>10</sup>

Conditions for agriculture changed quickly. By 1920, much earlier than for manufacturing or mining, the loss of markets and the lack of a new economic frontier clearly revealed that farmers produced more than the market could sustain. In the years 1919 –1929, the price of wheat fell from \$2.19 a bushel to \$1.04. Farm income fell from 16 % of national income in 1919 to 11.5 % by 1925, to 5.8 % in 1933. Farm cash incomes fell from an aggregate of \$10.3 billion in 1929, to \$4.2 billion by 1933, a 60% decline. By 1933, the average per capita net income for southern farmers, owners included, ranged from a low of \$89 in the black belt to \$127 in the coastal plain. The per capita income for Mississippians, for example, fell to \$117. Few of the tenant farmers of Arkansas and Mississippi had received any cash income since 1921. American policy

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<sup>10</sup> John D. Black, *Parity, Parity, Parity* (Cambridge: The Harvard Committee on Research in the Social Sciences, 1942), 4-5, 45; Gilbert C. Fite, *George N. Peek and the Fight for Farm Parity* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954), 8, 9-10; Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census of the United States, V, Agriculture*, 1920 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1922), 514. The census reveals that in the Midwest almost fifty percent of farmers owned motorized vehicles and almost seventy percent had telephones.



makers and politicians did not use Turner's language of the closed frontier to describe the economic landscape of the 1930s; many attributed difficulties to the vicissitudes of a mature economy.<sup>11</sup>

### Pre-New Deal Efforts to "Adjust" Agriculture

United States creditors curtailed loans to Europe at the end of the war, resulting in lost markets for basic agricultural products. Between 1919 and 1922, the value of U.S. agricultural exports declined by more than half, from \$4.1 billion to \$1.8 billion. The U.S. tariff policy further compounded the problems for American agriculture. Following accepted protectionist economic policy, the Republican-controlled Congress raised tariffs on imports, which further reduced the ability of foreign nations to pay for American agricultural exports while protecting American industrial production from competition. While foreign markets diminished, grains and meat from South America and Canada entered the world market in significant quantities. The U.S. Government withdrew agricultural wartime price supports in 1919-1920; when prices began to fall in 1920, no mechanism existed to cushion the shock.<sup>12</sup>

As early as 1920, the farm bloc, a group of Congressmen unofficially led by Republican Senator George W. Norris of Nebraska, voiced support for some sort of price-equalization machinery. One Iowan explained to Norris that Congress ought to

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1933*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1934), 556-570. Roger D. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), 9.

<sup>12</sup>Fite, *George N. Peek*, 9-10; Gene Smiley, *The American Economy in the Twentieth Century* (Cincinnati: South-Western Publishing Company, 1944), 14-40; George F. Warren and Frank A. Pearson, *Prices* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1933), 39-62; Black, 85-89.

guarantee farmers, “a reasonable profit, and fair return on everything they produced.” A Des Moines lawyer urged Secretary of Agriculture Henry C. Wallace to “see to it that minimum prices were set at the cost of production plus a fair profit.”<sup>13</sup>

In the winter of 1922, Wallace convened a conference concerning the maladjustment of agricultural and industrial prices. George N. Peek, president of the Moline Plow Company and later an official under New Deal Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace, suggested that a “fair exchange value” be placed on agricultural products. Peek defined “fair exchange value,” a term translated into popular jargon as “parity,” as “one which bears the same ratio to the current general price index as a ten-year average crop price bore to the average price index for the same period.” In 1922, wheat sold for \$1.02 a bushel; according to Peek’s calculations, the “fair exchange value” or “parity” price would be \$1.60 a bushel.<sup>14</sup>

Peek’s calculations represented a synthesis of the 1922 general price index of 152 and an agricultural price index of 97. The agricultural price index came from USDA Bulletin 999, *Prices of Farm Products in the United States* by George F. Warren. Concurrently with USDA Bulletin 999, the Department of Agriculture commenced publication of a power index series in *Weather, Crops, and Markets*. Utilizing a synthesis of Warren, Peek, and *Weather, Crops, and Markets*, USDA economists chose

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<sup>13</sup> James E. Boyle, *Farm Relief: A Brief on the McNary-Haugen Plan* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1928), 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* Black, *Parity*, 45-47

the average of prices paid and received during the years 1910-1914 as the baseline, or 100.<sup>15</sup>

Using this new statistical tool, representatives from agricultural states attempted to fix farm markets by legislation. The McNary-Haugen Bill, first introduced in 1923, represented an attempt to adjust agricultural pricing by using direct governmental interference in the market as a "normalizing" influence. In some ways, the McNary-Haugen Bill of 1923 foreshadowed the Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933. Both measures offered relief in terms of surplus reduction, loans, and price insurance, and both attracted the support of the liberal/progressive elements of Congress and the vacillating support of farm-state conservatives. Both plans benefited prosperous and middle-class farm interests at the expense of tenants and agricultural laborers.

One principal difference was the manner in which the legislation proposed to treat the agricultural surplus. The McNary-Haugen Bill proposed to establish a parity price in the U.S. market by "dumping" the surplus abroad. The government would purchase all agricultural production in excess of that which insured a domestic parity price. In turn, the government would sell this surplus on the international market at whatever price it brought. The differential between what the government paid and

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<sup>15</sup>Black, *Ibid.*; U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, *Agricultural Parity: Historical Review and Alternative Calculations, Agricultural Economic Report No. 671*, by Lloyd D. Teingen (New York: Economic Research Service, 1987), 3. Professor George F. Warren of Cornell did yeoman work in assembling the database. He also convinced FDR to buy gold in order, theoretically, to raise prices. The President's gold buying plan was very informal. At breakfast once a week FDR would determine the price the U.S. Government would pay for a stated quantity of newly mined domestic gold. The measure was, as the great majority of economists warned at the time, ineffective. The only appreciable commodity price increase was that of gold; it reached \$35.00 an ounce in 1934 at the program's conclusion. Gold had demanded \$20.65 an ounce at the programs beginning.

received was to be recovered by imposing an equalization fee on producers. The Agricultural Adjustment Act proposed to reduce the amount of surplus by invoking a domestic allotment plan. While the Agricultural Adjustment Act reduced the surplus by controlling production, McNary-Haugen allowed unabated production. The McNary-Haugen Bill met defeat in three consecutive congresses before it passed and twice fell to President Calvin Coolidge's veto.<sup>16</sup>

Deep South legislators gave McNary-Haugen tepid support, at best, throughout its life. Although they represented agricultural states, they also represented, above all, the interests of prosperous agrarians. Even in the midst of deepening financial distress experienced by a majority of their constituents, they remained conservative Democrats. Unmoved by the progressivism of Republican Senators Robert La Follette of Wisconsin or George Norris of Nebraska, they focused primarily on reducing tariffs and safeguarding the well-being of commercial farmers. In 1933, FDR called for the support and leadership of these southern representatives but found that the deepening economic crises moved them only to lukewarm and temporary support for New Deal initiatives. They still championed the cause of the prosperous and middle-class farmer at the expense of the dispossessed cotton cultivators and their views eventually dominated the goals and methods of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration.

As Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumed office in March 1933, amidst a wholesale and universally acknowledged depression, there already existed concepts and tools designed to rectify the imbalance in the relationship between agricultural and industrial prices. The phrase "mature economy" became a sort of verbal shorthand for the economic implications of Turner's closed frontier thesis. Specifically, conservatives

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<sup>16</sup> Boyle, *Farm Relief*, 29.

promoted the “confidence thesis,” and New Dealers argued the validity of the “purchasing power thesis.” New Dealers and progressives argued that the government had to replace the opportunities and stimuli for growth formerly provided by the frontier. The new economic frontier, they believed, lay in the area of increased consumerism prompted by a higher standard of living characterized by Columbia professor and “Brains Trustee” Rexford G. Tugwell as a “pleasure economy.” Mal-distribution of wealth, disparity in buying power between industrial and agricultural workers, and irrational land usage sprang directly from the closing of foreign markets, the saturation of the American consumer, and the absence of the promise of radical new consumer oriented technology, in short, the fruits of a closed frontier.<sup>17</sup>

In the course of the debate, policy makers explored both derivatives and negations of the closed frontier thesis. Herbert Hoover saw the promise of a new economic frontier in the thaumaturgic contributions of science and engineering, an articulation of the confidence thesis. He believed that capital needed only the tools and products promised by an unrestrained application of science and technology. He found allies. At the center of one New Deal agency, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), two Mississippi cotton barons designed the programs that inflicted devastating oppression on the nation’s cotton cultivators. Oscar Goodbar

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<sup>17</sup>An excellent, but relatively brief, summary of the positions of New Dealers, Progressives, radicals, and conservatives relative to the “mature economy thesis” is found in: Theodore Rosenof, “Understanding the Crash,” in *Major Problems in American History, 1920-1945*, Colin Gordon, ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999). 193-200. A fuller treatment, and the work from which this essay is derived, is available in Rosenof’s, *Dogma, Depression, and the New Deal: The Debate of Political Leaders Over Economic Recovery* (Port Washington, NY: National University Publications, Kennikat Press, 1975).

Johnston, manager of Delta Pine and Land Company, and Cully Alton Cobb, agricultural publisher and one-time Deputy Director of the Mississippi State Agricultural Extension Service, ensured that the AAA worked to rationalize cotton production to the benefit of large planters and to some members of the American Farm Bureau Federation.<sup>18</sup>

The term “parity” and the notion of rationalization of agricultural prices became part and parcel of the New Deal’s farm policy. By 1933, politicians and policy makers subsumed the technical nature of the statistical term “parity” into a politically correct and virtuous sounding aspiration. Politicians and government bureaucrats used the term to sell the notion of justice, fairness, and equity. The American people believed in all three – provided that the imposition of such cost nothing. “Parity” cost a lot and it did not impose justice, fairness, or equity.<sup>19</sup>

#### Back to the Land - Notions of Community

Commonly held assumptions concerning the superiority of country life and the societal benefits of communal living formed part of the intellectual background to the Tupelo Homesteads, Dyess Colony, and the Delta Cooperative Farm. In spite of a

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<sup>18</sup> David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1980), 122, 141-142; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 111-112, 218; Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 159-60; Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton’s Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999); Roy V. Scott and J. G. Shoalmire, *The Public Career of Cully A. Cobb: A Study in Agricultural Leadership* (Jackson: College and University Press of Mississippi, 1973); The Farm Bureau was able to increase its membership by huge numbers with the advent of the AAA production contracts. Thousands of sharecroppers were intimidated or tricked into paying dues to the AFBA, an organization diametrically opposed to programs that benefited sharecroppers.

<sup>19</sup>Government subsidies to agricultural interests have been an increasingly large part of the Federal Budget since the AAA’s programs were inaugurated in 1933.

transition from frontier subsistence survival to urban-centered market capitalism, American ideology retained an articulated preference for the character and values that necessarily come from the country. Benjamin Franklin held that as societies aged they became corrupt. To Franklin, an urban and industrialized society marked full maturity and the apex of corruption; according to Franklin, maturation was prelude to destruction. Thomas Jefferson believed that a virtuous society required a dominant class of unencumbered yeoman farmers. These yeoman farmers, Jefferson thought, were – alone of all classes – able to act and govern according to the dictates of a free and disinterested conscience; wage laborers would necessarily be bound by the political, social, and moral preferences of employers. President Theodore Roosevelt added enthusiasm for outdoor and rural life, manifested by the Country Life Movement. In 1933, President Franklin Roosevelt echoed the same sentiments in attributing to country life both the benefits of peace of mind and the opportunity to gain a “competence.” In August of 1933, in an impromptu speech to residents of a vocational farm for boys, FDR articulated part of his notions:

More and more people are discovering that if they go to live on a farm they will never starve to death, while they may if they remain in the city. Of course, in the city they have a chance of becoming millionaires. But there are lots of things better than growing exceedingly rich and one of them is having the assurance of a competence, of a sufficient living, of a good life and good neighbors. You boys have a mighty fine chance at that assured life.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> An excellent, but brief, view of Franklin’s notions and, to some extent, those of Thomas Jefferson, is found in Drew R. McCoy, “Benjamin Franklin’s Vision of a Republican Political Economy for America,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, 35 (October 1978): 605-626. Roosevelt’s quotation is taken from: *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. 2, *Year of Crises* (New York: Random House, 1938), 320.

Indeed, American politicians often invoked the hope-laden properties of the yeoman farmer mythology. In 1936, after demonstrating a decided animosity toward thousands of evicted sharecroppers, Arkansas Governor Junius Marion Futrell opened the newly-created Arkansas Farm Tenancy Commission with a statement of faith in farm life. Farm ownership, he said, "will give our country more real protection against foreign invasion and conquest than the expenditures of millions on our armies and navies." Fully concurring with those sentiments, the Commission responded, "Farming is a special pursuit fundamentally different from all others . . . a way of life all its own . . . Farm-home ownership is definitely related to character and patriotism. It is conducive to high character and good citizenship . . . America will not be a great nation by the end of the century unless she preserves a healthy rural life."<sup>21</sup>

Politicians and policy makers of the depression years considered benefits accruing to individual farm owners less important than the preservation of American agricultural capitalism. Private ownership precluded evicted sharecroppers and destitute hardscrabble farmers from joining the ranks of leftist movements. According to the then current doctrine, "no property owner could become a Communist." The Farm Security Administration (FSA), stepparent to the Tupelo Homesteads, gained the support of otherwise conservative politicians who believed that a government-sponsored program of small farm ownership diminished the attractiveness and, thus, the effectiveness of such groups as the Communist-led Sharecroppers Union and the Southern Tenant Farmers'

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<sup>21</sup> The quotes, ellipses included, are taken directly from Donald H. Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971), 128.



Union, an adjunct of the Socialist Party of America (SPA). Indeed, the legislation that established the Farm Security Administration (FSA, 1937) also prohibited government sponsorship or cooperation with any future community or collective/cooperative projects. Notions of cooperative farming distressed large commercial interests and alarmed the potentially prosperous clientele represented by the American Farm Bureau. Even the radical Midwest farm interests, represented by such groups as the National Farmers' Union and the Farm Holiday Association, which encouraged federal management of agricultural pricing, maintained a rigid orthodoxy relative to individual farm ownership. Traditional American farm interests saw communal, cooperative, or collective farm experiments as a challenge to their prosperity and posterity. Landowning farmers prized their independence and they saw collective agriculture as a threat to maintaining such independence.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, prior to the complete dominance of the market over the subsistence economy and before the closing of the frontier deprived un-landed farmers of opportunity, some Americans had already embraced the notions of communal efforts, communities, cooperatives, and collectives. Agriculture had often, but not always, been the focus of such movements.

Communities included particular religious, ethical, or ethnic preferences. In the 1820s, '30s, and '40s, communitarians established dozens of communities throughout the United States stretching from New England to Utah. Motivations for removal and community sprang from such disparate sources as revolt against the slave-like working conditions extant in English-style New England textile factories to the discovery of golden tablets at Hill Cumorah in New York. The movement continued throughout the

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 129 and *passim*.

nineteenth and into the twentieth century. In addition to the Mormon settlement in Utah, one which M.L. Wilson studied with great interest, in 1892 the Jewish Agricultural and Industrial Aid Society (Jewish Agricultural Society) established a community in Woodbine, New Jersey, remarkably similar to ones later constructed by the New Deal some four decades later. The Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), known popularly as “Wobblies,” experimented with collective farming, adding a twentieth-century element to the agrarian socialist experimentation of Robert Owen and Charles Fourier.

Interestingly, very few communitarian projects were established for economic or basic subsistence reasons. Most communities were formed in an attempt to provide a tolerant atmosphere for experimentation in human relationships or for millennial considerations.<sup>23</sup>

Meanwhile, the government also periodically expressed its interest in private agriculture by enacting several land acquisition programs. The Land Act (1820), the Preemption Act (1841), the Homestead Act (1862), and the Farm Loan Act (1916) were all efforts to ease land hunger. The consistent removal of Native Americans from vouchsafed land was further testament to the government’s pragmatic response to white land-acquisitiveness.

Given the history of Americans’ fascination with agrarian experimentation evidenced by the various communities and government land disposition policies, it is easy to understand how the ravages of the Great Depression served to make more seductive than ever notions of “back to the land.” In 1932, for the first and only time in

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<sup>23</sup> Conkin, 1-6, 27-30; Holley, 11, 20-22. Bernard Stershner, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1965), 91-109. For information on the hundreds of American communities see: Robert S. Fogerty, *Dictionary of American Communal and Utopian History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980), *passim*.

American history, population movement favored the country over the city. Rural population growth exceeded that of urban growth by more than 266,000. This change in population velocity, admittedly very small, nevertheless, was an indication of the power of the notion. For some people, “back to the land” was verbal shorthand for romanticized visions of rural life. For city dwellers, the nostalgic meditations on clean air, unhurried life, simple pleasures, and self-determination built a place of mental refuge amidst the crumbling economic infrastructure of the city. Many prodigals returned to the rural areas of their youth and found that the imagined and incorrectly remembered benefits of country life no longer existed, or that their memories omitted some of the basic reasons for having left the country in the first place.<sup>24</sup>

#### Progressive Notions of Cooperation – *Atlantic Crossings*

Daniel T. Rodgers, in his masterful study of the transference of social politics among North Atlantic progressives via *Atlantic Crossings*, says that U.S. progressives were slow to consider the problem of American agriculture:

Old forms of poverty never interested progressives as much as the new domain of wage labor, old forms of trade as much as the outward rush of market commodification, old forms of production as much as the new world of concentrated force and massed economic power. The diffuse and tradition-bound populations of the great rural hinterlands did not, in the first instance, draw their attention at all.<sup>25</sup>

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century Grange, Agricultural Wheel, and the Farmer’s Alliance in the U.S. were manifestations of the “Atlantic Crossings” of

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<sup>24</sup> Paul W. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1959), 28-29 and *passim*; Holley, *Uncle Sam’s Farmers*, 1-29; Hamilton, *From New Day*, 179.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 318.

progressive notions. Although turn of the century progressives were, as a group, slow and moderate in their pursuit of rural reforms, the example that tiny Denmark provided, along with the apparent redemption of Irish agriculture by means of cooperation and cooperative associations, excited American rural reformers and agrarians. In 1908, American retail mogul and only recently a California produce baron, David Luben, convinced the King of Italy to sponsor the first international agricultural database, *Intuit International D'Agriculture* (International Agricultural Institute) in Rome. By 1935, according to the Institute, the United States still ranked number one and Texas number two in worldwide rankings of cotton lint production, but the United States' dominant position was becoming ever more tenuous. In that year the Great American Delta ranked only sixth in world cotton production rankings, lagging behind Egypt, India, and Peru.<sup>26</sup>

Rexford G. Tugwell, a disciple of Simon Nelson Patten of the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, also drew heavily from the notions of his Columbia colleague John Dewey. Patten, a German trained economist, was decidedly hostile to classical economics. He told his students that they should not worry about savings, that they should in fact spend every penny and borrow in order to spend more. Possibly his advice was meant for the shock value, but it contained a slice of what would later be labeled "Keynesian economics." Patten was probably emphasizing the point that a continuous circulation and growth of the money supply was central to high employment,

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 318-366. *Institut International D'Agriculture. Annuaire International De Statistique Agricole, 1935-36 et 1936-37.* (The International Institute for Agriculture: Rome, 1937), tables 837-41.

thus high consumption, thus a healthy economy. The pragmatism of John Dewey influenced both Tugwell and Milburn L. Wilson.<sup>27</sup>

Two adherents of the notion that the new economic frontier had to come from an increased standard of living, characterized by a shorter working day and the advantages of a pleasure economy, articulated and defended the notions that directly resulted in the creation of the Tupelo Homesteads and Dyess Colony. Milburn L. Wilson, an agricultural economist from Montana State University, and Rexford G. Tugwell believed in a planned economy, and especially planned land use.<sup>28</sup>

According to Tugwell, an essential component of a rationalized economy was the decentralization of industry. Tugwell was not enamored of subsistence gardening and farming; he viewed farm life as physically harmful, culturally deprived, and intellectually barren. He championed the rapid mechanization of agriculture and the ever diminishing labor required. Tugwell called for planned land use as part of the girders for erecting what his mentor, Simon Patten, had labeled a "pleasure economy." The aggregate wealth of the world was sufficient, if properly distributed and managed, to provide an economy bereft of egregiously distasteful and laborious tasks; the pleasure economy envisioned by Patten and Tugwell sharply reduced time required to earn a comfortable livelihood. People would be free to devote their increased personal time to community and personal development. Creation of the pleasure economy required a few prerequisite changes in the political economy. Complete transparency in terms of markets and resources must govern economic decisions. Companies and institutions would share information and

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<sup>27</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 318-366; Paul W. Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 86, 121, 146-52, 164-165, 295, 328-329; David M. Kennedy, *Over Here*, 120-121, 141-142; Bernard Stershner, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, 1965, 11-26, 91-109; 170-193.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, Rodgers.

many of the restrictions governing the operation of monopolies would be discarded. A rational economy, one that provided dignified and pleasurable economic pursuits to everyone, required planning. Planning, to Tugwell and his colleagues did not mean simple orderliness in the application of resources to tasks. Planning in this economic sense meant that the entire inventory of the world's assets be employed by economic technicians with access to a comprehensive knowledge of total resources, both physical and human, and the authority to install mandatory macroeconomic procedures governing the global economy and its markets. It was decidedly irrational in Tugwell's view, for example, for a radio manufacturer to schedule production for a factory without first knowing the size of the market and the resources and intentions of his competitors. Such application of resources by sheer instinct to meet a market demand, shrouded in mystery and subject to disruption by competition, was tantamount to betting against the house. Irrational economic behavior resulted in surpluses and shortages, roaring industrial production and factories in mothballs; irrational capitalism allowed and even predestined depressions.<sup>29</sup>

Tugwell did not expect that the world wide "pleasure economy" would become a reality within the foreseeable future. The Columbia professor believed that mankind was unable to accept the realities necessary for a pleasure economy; the changes would not be accepted, they would have to be mandated. People must experience the benefits of economic and social cooperation in order to be willing to sacrifice that degree of personal autonomy necessary for a cooperative society. He saw no indication that the world's various political entities were willing to place their economic systems, and thus, their

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<sup>29</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 318-366; Stershner, *Rexford Tugwell*, 11-16; 370-395; David Hamilton, *New Day*, 181-183; 216-236.

community and society, at the disposal of a few planners. Tugwell's system was necessarily socialistic, and equally as necessarily non-Marxist. People would never cooperate to the extent necessary; they would have to be coerced.

There were some prerequisites to forming a pleasure economy that contemporaries would accept. His application of Columbia colleague John Dewey's philosophy of pragmatism allowed Tugwell to accept and use programs that would have been disowned by the managers of a pleasure economy. Tugwell believed that decentralization of industries would remove many of the problems associated with the densely populated urban industrial centers. By moving industrial production to smaller communities, workers living on plots large enough to establish gardening and some animal husbandry would be able to bridge the income gap caused by reduced hours. Subsistence gardening or farming became analogous to one of the theses in classic Marxist dialectics. It would serve a utilitarian purpose until its antithesis was called into existence. The Homestead subsistence gardening projects, the subsistence farm projects of the state Rural Rehabilitation Corporations, Dyess Colony, and the entirety of the Resettlement Administration program were, in Tugwell's view, practical concessions demanded by the spirit of the age and the mind of the times. Dyess Colony, the Tupelo Homesteads and the Resettlement Administration were exercises in the application of pragmatism. The Great Depression opened a brief window for experimentation. How far could the *mentalité* of the Great Depression accommodate prerequisites for a pleasure economy? Perhaps the Colonists at Dyess, the Resettlement clients of the RA, and the Tupelo Homesteaders might provide useful sociological data for future planning. Tugwell was adamant that willingness and skill in cooperating were mandatory

prerequisites for further rational economic planning. He was equally sure that that contemporary people would not willingly cooperate; cooperation must be induced, coerced. It would come only with the application of duress.

Tupelo Homesteads and Dyess Colony were laboratories wherein to test the resistance to cooperation. Oddly, Delta Cooperative Farm emphasized cooperation more emphatically and was less sensitive to personal dignity than did either of the New Deal communities. The Christians and the socialists, it seemed, held a lower notion of the dignity of man than did the New Dealers.<sup>30</sup>

M.L. Wilson was not as convinced as Tugwell that the future course of the American economy would require a reduced workday, nor was he confident that the economic nationalism in vogue as a response to the depression was a permanent alteration. He did believe that American agriculture suffered from decidedly irrational land usage and that subsistence agriculture was a likely cure to shrinking incomes and inadequate diets. M.L. Wilson was devoted to subsistence gardening and subsistence farms, and enamored of rural life.<sup>31</sup>

Pragmatism held, among many other notions, that one should plan and alter institutions and mores to fit the circumstances at hand. M.L. Wilson adhered to this notion of pragmatism but added to it a rather strong insistence that the pragmatic actions and policies designed to fit the contemporary political economy could not and should not be mandated or heavily influenced by governmental or institutional authorities. Wilson

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New World*, *passim*; Stershner, *Rexford Tugwell*, 251-278; Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, with an introduction by Alex Lichtenstein, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1977: reprint, New York: Covici, Friede, 1936), *passim*.



believed that the benefits of alterations in policies and institutions should be explained to the public. Institution of such changes had to gain not only the approval of the majority, but required their active involvement. Wilson was a pragmatist, an advocate of pragmatic planning, but he was above all a democrat. He was leery of the possible restriction of liberty as a function of planning. He insisted that American society:

Is capable of producing a kind of supergovernmental (*sic*) economic and social intelligence which (*sic*) can function in harmony with our democratic heritage and attitude of mind.<sup>32</sup>

Wilson came into conflict with Interior Secretary Harold Ickes over this very issue.

Wilson designed the construction procedures of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH) to use local and democratic control. Ickes objected and was relieved when Comptroller General John R. McCarl mandated compliance with government mandated controls. Lawrence Westbrook, an assistant to Harry Hopkins in both the Federal Emergency Relief Administration and the Works Progress Administrations, sought to establish cooperative manufacturing businesses in the three communities in which he held a consultant's position.<sup>33</sup>

The views of Wilson, Tugwell, and Westbrook, all influenced by European models and pragmatism are evidenced to some degree in all three of the communities in this study. Tugwell expected that, due to the enormous strain on city populations, industry would de-centralize. He expected component parts to be constructed in various small town or even rural locations. Westbrook believed that such decentralization was unlikely and he had doubts about the ability of subsistence farming or homesteading to

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<sup>32</sup> M.L. Wilson, "How New Deal Agencies are Affecting Family Life," *Journal of Home Economics*, 27, (1935): 275.

<sup>33</sup> Conkin, *Tomorrow a New Deal*, 73-87, 118-124; Stershner, *Rexford Tugwell*, 139, 395; Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 450-455.

provide a middle-class income. M.L. Wilson was a champion of subsistence gardening and insistent on local and client control. Tugwell, Wilson and Westbrook felt cooperative associations were essential for success and the emphasis on such at Dyess Colony was a source of conflict and irritation throughout the colony's existence.

The European model relied on a three-legged structure for reestablishing and maintaining a vibrant and prosperous country life. The application of practical education, good business, and community cooperation had rescued Denmark from the devastation of the 1870s. With the loss of her southern provinces through war and the devastation of grain crops because of drought, Danish farmers faced extinction. Their rescue came via an overlapping network of producer cooperatives. Individual small operators were able to profit from economic leverage and management. Cooperative cows came with a record of input and output; instead of being left free to graze at will, the cooperative cow was tethered to a carefully selected grazing area; and high quality eggs and dairy products provided an enviable standard of living. Much of the initial inspiration of Miles Horton's Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee and Commonwealth College in Mena, Arkansas came from the Danish Folk School Model. The successful Danish and Irish cooperatives served as a model for U.S. agrarian cooperatives, manifested in such diverse institutions as grain elevators in the mid-west and agricultural marketing cooperatives. By the 1930s, cooperatives marketed most of the American tobacco crop and much of the cotton. In the western grain and dairy regions of the United States marketing cooperatives enabled the mainly family-sized farm operators to gain the market power that comes with leverage. In California and especially in the Southeast cotton areas, agribusiness conglomerates and the cotton aristocracy dominated production. In a perversion

of the spirit of the European cooperative notion, in the South cotton barons formed marketing cooperatives consisting only of large producers. The vast majority of southern cotton cultivators were bereft of the benefits of cooperative education.<sup>34</sup>

Another divide between the Northern Atlantic progressive notions and their continental cousins is illustrated by the concept of cooperation. In the United States, southern cotton barons restricted the term to economic consolidation – the power of the elites to magnify their economic power. In Denmark and Ireland, the notion of cooperation certainly included economic endeavors, but it also embraced the idea of a more sociable and supporting society/community. From these notions, for example, emerged the Llano Colony and the Highlander Folk School. In all three of the projects discussed herein, New Dealers, Churchmen, and Socialists sought to bring not only the economic benefits of producer and consumer cooperatives to Dyess and Delta Cooperative Farm, but also to encourage the flowing of a cooperative spirit. Such cooperative spirits would counteract the stark and barren social lives of rural southerners. The New Dealers, Churchmen, and Socialists all agreed that the single most important characteristic for a potential Colonist, Cooperator, or even a Homesteader – in Tupelo there was no common economic endeavor – was a “cooperative attitude.”<sup>35</sup>

Concepts that gave birth to the Tupelo Homesteads and ideation made into physical reality in Dyess Colony and Delta Cooperative Farm thus did not spring suddenly into existence as an attempt to mitigate the Great Depression. Notions of “back to the land” and the advantages of community living had circulated consistently between

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 110, 164, 192-193, 195.

<sup>35</sup> Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings*, 316-366.

the times of Jefferson and Roosevelt, and among the North Atlantic progressives. The communities constructed by the New Deal continued the American flirtation with “back to the land” ideation.

### Congressional Consistency and the Dispossessed

At the beginning of the New Deal, FDR had little problem in gaining bipartisan support for legislation proposed in the first hundred days. Not surprisingly, however, one bill that encountered some difficulty and delay was the Agricultural Adjustment Act. The inability of farm interests to present a united front predated the New Deal. The McNary-Haugen bills suffered from the conflicting notions of how to compute equalization fees. A wheat farmer on the very edge of the cultivable arid West thought it fair and reasonable to assess fees based on production; farmers in more productive areas deemed it obvious to assess on the basis of acreage. Wisconsin dairy farmers, dealing in highly perishable commodities, had altogether different concerns than those who raised cotton or corn. Farmers who produced mainly for export faced different problems from those who produced primarily for domestic consumption. Each new version of the McNary-Haugen bill had highlighted different provisions and benefited particular farmers at the expense of others. Consequently, one year’s congressional proponent of the legislation became the next year’s opponent. The farm bloc failed to achieve cohesion because of the disparate interests of those it represented. Significantly, however, in none of the versions did the bill attempt to assist tenant farmers or agricultural laborers.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, New Deal efforts to adjust agricultural incomes fell victim to particularism. Any New Deal programs that encouraged a form of farm production at variance with that preferred by the interests represented by the American Farm Bureau

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<sup>36</sup> Hamilton, *From New Day*, 21-22; 28-30; 198; 241.

and agribusinesses quickly faced obstacles. For example, when the Farm Security Administration (FSA) entertained notions of land held in perpetuity by the federal government and leased to tenant farmers, heretofore supportive Congressmen became belligerent opponents. In the view of their middle-class and prosperous agricultural constituents, government ownership threatened both private property rights and the prospect of acquisition of new land, at attractive prices, from under-funded, under-educated, under-privileged, and under-represented newly-propertied small farmers. Distribution of small parcels of land to individuals had always provided opportunities for the prosperous to accumulate large amounts of property at the expense of small operators. In many cases, the amount of land distributed was too small for the "dry-farming" techniques required in the West. It soon became apparent that agriculture in the arid west had to be conducted on a bonanza scale in order to be profitable. Bonanza farming required that the newly enfranchised have access to capital; most of them did not. Unable to farm enough acres to gain the economies of scale, unable to secure affordable financing, and suffering from discriminatory freight and storage rates, these newly-propertied small farmers often had no choice but to sell to better financed interests. To avoid concentration of newly awarded lands in the hands of large agricultural interests, various New Deal programs attempted the sell the notion of land held in perpetuity by the government and farmed by qualified tenants on a life-tenancy basis. Deep-South Congressmen vigorously opposed such legislation. They demanded occupancy fee-simple, which meant, of course, that any recipient of government land grants would be free to sell to better-financed, large land interests.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Hamilton, *From New Day*, *passim*. Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 99-103; 107-108; 112-115; 181-199.

Congressional support for New Deal agricultural readjustment plans also waned whenever such programs materially and substantially offered to assist those on the bottom of the agricultural ladder, specifically, farm laborers, sharecroppers and tenants. After all, said Arkansas Governor Futrell, you couldn't do much for "worthless people who can't be helped." For the most part, the terms "tenant farmer" or "sharecropper" were practically meaningless to the cotton cultivators of the Great American Delta. However, under the provisions of the 1934 AAA producer contract, the distinction between "sharecropper" and tenant farmer became crucial. A tenant farmer had rights to a portion of the spoils paid under the crop reduction contracts; a sharecropper had none. To garner all of the payments from the AAA, many planters manipulated the status of their tenant farmers to that of sharecroppers. When asked to comment on the Arkansas Farm Tenancy Commission, Mississippi Governor Hugh White said he did not want to burden the Mississippi Legislature with the issue. Mississippi, he said, did not have those kind of problems.<sup>38</sup>

It is interesting to note that Congress had little difficulty accepting the notion that farmers ought to get "parity" because it was a fair recompense for hard work. They "deserved" to have a certain quality of life. However, sharecroppers, said an Arkansas deputy sheriff, ought to be satisfied with their condition; they got what their work was worth.<sup>39</sup>

Many planners and policy makers envisioned a radically altered American economic system and they planned for it. This chapter has examined the development of

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<sup>38</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 16 August 1935.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 68.

the American agricultural allotment plan and the economic and cultural theories that shaped all three of the communities under study.

Before the programs of the AAA actuated the creation of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms, and before the FSA introduced the notion of permanent tenancy, a new agrarian experiment began in Tupelo, Mississippi. Oddly, this project sprang not from the mechanisms of the Agricultural Adjustment Act but from the president's initial attempt to rescue industry, the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) of 1933.

## CHAPTER III

### TUPELO HOMESTEADS – A SHELTER IN THE STORM

***“But there are lots of things better than growing exceedingly rich and one of them is having the assurance of a competence, of a sufficient living, of a good life and good neighbors.”*** Franklin D. Roosevelt<sup>1</sup>

***“I remember that during those days you couldn’t hire a decent carpenter in Tupelo, we had all of them working for us.”*** David O. Puckett, Jr., Tupelo Lumber Company<sup>2</sup>

***“Mr. Anthony is, I believe, a warm blooded southerner, native to this region, and a firm believer in individual rights, and from his attitude I knew he resented being asked to stop his target practice.”*** Claude A. Wagner, Jr., U.S. Park Service Ranger<sup>3</sup>

The Natchez Parkway meanders for more than 400 miles from near Natchez to near Nashville. Along the way, travelers may stop and read about events of the prehistoric and frontier history of the area. Interpretative signs point out locations of a treaty signing by Native diplomats and immigrant warlords, a clash between Native American nations and European empires, or just a popular “stand.” Brochures and books inform visitors of the age of warfare, banditry, whiskey, and murder. The dark history of the Trace adds an intriguing stain to the romance and adventure. It is good that the public has access to this well-maintained, well-researched, and well-articulated commentary. However, undocumented and in the shadows, unheralded by signs and unnoticed by travelers is a provocative and well-preserved physical testament – an artifact of an era not so far gone – to an effort to assuage the consequences of, arguably, the greatest emotional

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume 2, Year of Crises* (New York: Random House, 1938), 320.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Author, 1 September 1999, Tupelo, MS. Recording is in author’s possession.



and economic storm to assault the nation. For a brief while, some Tupelo people found shelter from the storm in the Tupelo Homesteads.<sup>4</sup>

The Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH) initiated the first federal attempt at agrarian community building. The DSH intended to help middle class people mitigate the effects of the depression. Of the more than 100 agrarian communities funded by the federal government, the one at Tupelo is the best example of the philosophy and failure of the DSH projects.

Oddly, one of the first New Deal demonstrations in agrarian planning came not from the Agricultural Adjustment Act, specifically enacted to further agrarian interests, but within the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA). Franklin Delano Roosevelt believed that part of the answer to industrial doldrums lay in a revitalized farm income. As farm income grew, he reasoned, farmers would buy industrial products. His experience as Governor of New York and his conversations with M. L. Wilson and Rexford Tugwell convinced him that an entirely new class of producer/consumer could speed industrial recovery. Industrial workers, and other wage earners, could greatly increase their disposable income by growing a significant portion of their food on small homesteads. FDR envisioned a new class of American consumer/producers coming from urban congestion or from non-productive farms. They could go “back to the land” with the assistance of the federal government and begin producing for their own needs while buying the products of American industries. In April 1933, he wrote Republican Senator

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<sup>3</sup>“Memorandum for Mr. Smith, from Claude A. Wagner, Jr., 13 November 1940, NATR Accession #290, Box 8 Folder 98, Natchez Trace Archive, Tupelo, MS.

<sup>4</sup> Fred C. Smith, “The Tupelo Homesteads: New Deal Agrarian Experimentation, *Journal of Mississippi History*, 68, (2), (Summer 2006): 85-112.

George Norris of Nebraska of his desire to have congress enact “. . . one more bill which would allow us to spend \$25 million this year to put 25,000 families on farms at an average cost of \$1,000 per family.”<sup>5</sup> The President, as events clearly showed, was abysmally wrong in his estimate of the cost of resettlement. The Subsistence Homesteads concept appealed to Senator John H. Bankhead and on 9 March 1933, Bankhead introduced a bill to establish a national subsistence homestead program. Despite support from the President, the bill died in committee. Undeterred, Bankhead attached a subsistence homesteads provision to the National Industrial Recovery Act. The homesteads provision passed without discussion or opposition.<sup>6</sup>

Section 208, Title II of the NIRA, approved 16 June 1933, appropriated \$25 million “. . . to provide for aiding the redistribution of the overabundance of population in industrial centers” and granted the president authority to set up agencies for “. . . making loans for and otherwise aiding in the purchase of subsistence homesteads.”<sup>7</sup> This section of the NIRA represented the culmination and synthesis of several strands of economic, social, and agrarian planning. Acting under authority granted in the act, FDR assigned this project to Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes. Ickes, in turn, established within his department the Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH), and convened an advisory committee chaired by Senator Bankhead. The committee held its

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<sup>5</sup>Quoted in Holley, 26. For evidence of Wilson’s familiarity with FDR’s notions and New York programs see M.L. Wilson, “A Land Use Program for the Federal Government,” *Journal of Farm Economics*, 15 (April 1933): 217-35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 26-27; Conkin, 132-136; John H. Bankhead, “The One Way to Permanent Recovery,” *Liberty Magazine* (22 July 1933):18.

<sup>7</sup>*Monthly Labor Review* (July 1933): 75.

first meeting on 26 September 1933, and made a fifteen-point recommendation for use of the appropriated funds. The first two recommendations are of particular interest in conducting an evaluation of the Tupelo Homesteads. The first provision classified the need for a *Demonstration* project as urgent. The projects were to . . . “point the way to a program of a *permanent* character.” They were to reconcile the problems of the industrial worker and American agriculture with *experimental* projects; such reconciliation would . . . “*point the way out.*” The second provision of particular interest called for the demonstration projects to be located in, “. . . *problem areas* of the United States and not on the basis of allocations of funds on the basis of States, the projects to be selected . . . as to the individual soundness and merit.”<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, another group of projects often identified with the DSH was coming to fruition. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA), under the direction of Harry Hopkins, also began funding subsistence programs. Through consolidation and creation of the Resettlement Administration (RA), the supervision of all subsistence programs were eventually consolidated in the Agriculture Department’s Farm Security Administration (FSA). In April 1935, The RA assumed responsibility for the previously existing FERA subsistence projects and those funded by Section 208 of NIRA. Thus, the original DSH projects became identified with the much larger Rural Rehabilitation projects. Because of such linkage and identification, the DSH programs were later evaluated and criticized based on their perceived failure to meet criteria that were not part of their origin or intent. Consequently, political opponents of the New Deal criticized the DSH projects for failing to obtain objectives which they were not designed

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<sup>8</sup>*Monthly Labor Review* (September 1933): 1327-1328. Italic emphasis added by author.

to meet; circumstances soon proved that the DSH had trouble enough of its own without borrowing from other agencies. After the RA began its attempt to tackle the problem of rural poverty, the DSH projects seemed to be non-productive and the residents seemed to be beneficiaries of government largesse. Most of the homesteaders led lives indistinguishable from their contemporaries; furthermore, the government had provided the homesteaders with modern conveniences, tools, and equipment that their contemporaries had to purchase. The DSH projects also suffered from identification with the impulsive, impractical, ill-conceived, and wildly expensive Arthurdale, West Virginia, project, introduced later in this chapter.

The New Deal legislation enacted in the spring of 1933 reflected the contradictory notions about, and aspirations of, a revitalized agrarian community. Under the energetic and imaginative Hopkins, FERA established a program of subsistence homesteads as a part of its rural rehabilitation efforts. These programs were designed to help farmers who already received relief by making them self-sufficient. In contrast, the earlier DSH programs envisioned, with a very few exceptions, creation of a new economic entity that combined wage employment with agriculture. The DSH required a particular type of client. Clarence E. Pickett, Executive Secretary of the American Friends Service Committee and a proponent of DSH, briefly described the ideal client: "We must experiment with those who share the idealism of the movement, who have the capacity to respond to those ideals, who have a good deal of the pioneering spirit."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Proceedings: National Conference on Subsistence Homesteads, Dayton Ohio (December 1933): 28. The movement to which Pickett referred was the conscious effort to stretch the purchasing power of wage income by raising a large portion of food needs on the

DSH regulations denied persons on relief rolls participation in the homesteads. The application for a subsistence homestead required that the successful applicant: be an American citizen; live in an industrial center; be over twenty-one years old; have an income sufficient to meet homestead payments; and not have an income sufficient to secure a loan for a home using normal channels.<sup>10</sup> Because of two government agencies serving dual clienteles but using the same terminology, the DSH projects later lost their specific identification and became, in the mind of the public, simply another New Deal welfare project. One exception proved the rule. The DSH approved a very limited number of projects assisting impoverished farmers. However, the only project of this type ever completed was at Richton, Mississippi. Other rural projects initiated by FERA became identified with Richton because of the inclusion of the Rural Rehabilitation Corporations (RRC) and DSH under the umbrella of the Resettlement Administration (RA), created in 1935, under the direction of Rexford Tugwell. The Cumberland Homesteads near Crossville, Tennessee, also provided assistance to those on relief rolls. However, the Cumberland Homesteaders, in the main, had not been subsistence farmers, they were “displaced” and “stranded” workers. If, indeed, the Arthurdale project was the most controversial, it was simply because it was the most publicized.<sup>11</sup>

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homestead. The DSH distributed charts and graphs that illustrated the increased purchasing power of a family that practiced subsistence farming.

<sup>10</sup>Benjamin P. Groves, “The Federal Subsistence Homestead Program” (M.A. thesis., University of Cincinnati, 1935.) An original of the application is appended to Groves’s thesis.

<sup>11</sup>The Cumberland Homesteads was, and is, by far the most interesting. A very good account of the Cumberland project is found in: United States Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Russell Lord and Paul H. Johnstone, eds., *A Place on*

The DSH advisory committee identified three types of clientele and three types of proposed communities:

Homestead colonies established for industrial workers and located in the out-skirts of cities or large towns; rural settlements in which small industries or branches of large industries can be established; and agricultural settlements. The program will deal largely with city dwellers, stranded populations (i.e. those left jobless by the moving of local industries or the exhaustion of natural resources, as for instance coal and copper mines, sawmill workers, etc.), and farmers now working lands too poor to be profitable.

Each subsistence-homestead project will be established in accordance with the industrial and agricultural trends as they relate to the population problems of a given region or State.

Every undertaking will be regarded as experimental. The experiment is to test a method of living that may conserve the best of both urban and rural life, afford greater stability in family living and point the way to a more permanent adjustment for workers in the shorter hour week and part-time employment.<sup>12</sup>

Because the program was not intended to be a welfare effort and since homesteading represented a new economic endeavor, FDR maneuvered to have it administered by the person he considered the best executive in Washington, the "old curmudgeon," Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes. Ickes was an unfortunate choice as administrator in ultimate authority for the subsistence homestead program. He was authoritarian and viewed committees and boards with distrust and suspicion. He believed in micro-management and when his subordinates could not immediately answer inquiries as to minuscule details, he immediately lost confidence in them. Ickes was also tight-

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*Earth: A Critical Appraisal of Subsistence Homesteads* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), 82-96.

<sup>12</sup>*Monthly Labor Review*, 37 (November 1933): 1328. Under the RA the "subsistence program" was expanded to include other populations, thus creating other types of communities.

fisted and hyper-conservative about the distribution of federal funds; Harry Hopkins was not. Ickes, rarely finding a subordinate whom he liked, placed the program under M.L. Wilson, then the head of the AAA wheat section.<sup>13</sup>

M. L. Wilson did not remain long as Director of the Division of Subsistence Housing. By January 1934, differences with Ickes over the administration, control, and even the goals of DSH convinced Wilson of the need to work in some capacity free of Ickes's supervision. He took a position as Assistant Secretary (later Under Secretary) of the Department of Agriculture. Fundamental differences regarding fiduciary propriety, local control and community building exacerbated pre-existing political and administrative differences between Wilson and Ickes. Wilson envisioned communities planned and directed under local guidance, answerable to Washington only on fundamental questions of policy and administration.<sup>14</sup>

Wilson, true to his belief in the primacy of democracy, constructed the fiduciary machinery of the DSH with an eye toward local control and direction. Under the laws of Delaware, the DSH established the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation (FSHC),

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<sup>13</sup>According to Ickes, the president told Gifford Pinchot, Governor of Pennsylvania, that Ickes was "the greatest executive I have ever known." Pinchot was looking to advance his own interests; he may have been ingratiating himself to Ickes. In spite of an attempt by *The Chicago Tribune* to implicate Ickes in a financial scandal, Ickes maintained a reputation for uncompromising honesty. The quotation in this note is from Harold L. Ickes, *The Secret Diaries of Harold L. Ickes: The First Thousand Days, 1933-1936* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), 163. *The Secret Diaries of Harold Ickes*, noted above, contains evidence of the assertions made in this note. M.L. Wilson left the Department of Interior shortly after arriving to become Undersecretary of Agriculture. In this post and with the cooperation of Rexford Tugwell, he exercised influence over the entire rural rehabilitation, subsistence homesteads, and resettlement programs when they were combined under the Department of Agriculture.

<sup>14</sup>Conkin, 120.

a non-profit corporation, with stock held in trust by Secretary of the Interior Ickes. Under Wilson's plan, each new community would be planned, built, and administered by a local subsidiary corporation. By using the members of the local corporation to acquire and dispose of land and buildings and to contract with borrowers, architects, and builders, the projects were assured of local involvement and support. Wilson believed that such high profile local involvement would also serve to differentiate the subsistence projects from the relief efforts of the Public Works Administration (PWA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA).<sup>15</sup>

Ickes, on the other hand, viewed local control as an opportunity for graft and waste. There had been no hint of financial scandal in the Interior Department's PWA; Ickes believed in close scrutiny and multi-level approval of any expenditure. The ability of local organizations to select sites, hire architects, and spend money without the line-by-line approval of national authorities alarmed Ickes and provoked his suspicions. Historian Paul Conkin, the recognized authority on the New Deal community programs, argues that Ickes's fiduciary extremism, basic distrust of loosely supervised personnel, and his insistence on intense micro-management came to him as a function of his previous career as a political reformist in Chicago. Conkin attributes Wilson's insistence on local control to his career in agriculture dealing with farmers. In a re-statement of the Hamiltonian–Jeffersonian argument, Ickes trusted persons while Wilson trusted the people.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 105-106.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 93-130.



Ickes received aid in controlling the DSH from an unexpected and unappreciated source. Responding to President Roosevelt's ruling that required all government accounts be submitted, approved, and executed by General Accounting Office standards and procedures, on 15 March 1934, Comptroller-General John R. McCarl mandated that all federal funds, including those connected with subsistence housing projects, be deposited with the United States Treasurer and disbursed according to standard government disbursing and accounting procedures. Ickes bristled at the ruling, interpreting it as McCarl's attempt to expand his influence at Ickes's expense. The Secretary of Interior used this ruling, however, to modify Wilson's system of local control. Meanwhile, Charles Pynchon, Wilson's understudy at DSH, replaced him as Director in January 1934.<sup>17</sup>

By spring 1934, the Washington DSH office assumed practically all control of the projects. The local corporations had to surrender their legal status and the former board members reconvened as homestead associations. Only when a project was completed and ready for local ownership would a local corporation be formed. The local association still made recommendations stemming from their own investigations and fieldwork, but all decisions, from what materials to use to the specific applicants accepted, required approval from various newly formed sections of the DSH. As a result, the planning, building, and occupation of the homesteads experienced delays, duplication, and confusion that plagued the DSH for the remainder of its short life.

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<sup>17</sup>Glick, 1339-1384; Ickes, 335, Conkin, 119.

As news of the Division of Subsistence Homesteads and its \$25 million appropriation spread around the country, funding requests, mainly addressed to President and Mrs. Roosevelt, inundated the DSH offices. In February 1934, loan requests totaled over \$4.5 million. Real estate promoters, chambers of commerce, and individuals proposed particular schemes; others asked for loans to buy houses. Some of the notions for the use of the funds were bizarre, alchemy for example. A suggestion from one who identified himself only as "A Catholic Priest," recounted a tale in the life of St. Vincent de Paul, a French Catholic Priest captured by the Turks. The French cleric watched his captor melt gold and silver together until they were fused, then he added a yellow powder. "The result was considered gold. May I suggest that you have your chemists work on this possibility? It would increase the amount of gold we have for our money system or open the way for new standards." From the mass of requests and applications the DSH had to choose which projects deserved consideration, and then, which projects should be funded.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of October 1933, two projects had gained approval. The DSH made a \$50,000 loan to the Cooperative Production Units subsistence project already started by the Council of Social Agencies in Dayton, Ohio. Ralph Borsodi, the council's advisor, had long been a promoter of "back to the land" subsistence communities. The initial loan

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<sup>18</sup>Letter to President Roosevelt, from "A Catholic Priest," 21 September 1933, President's Personal File, Box 21-A, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park NY. Conkin, 101-104.

of \$50,000 was the extent of assistance to the Dayton project, and it was the only project in which the government did not own the land.<sup>19</sup>

The second project funded by DSH was its most famous and most controversial. Operators had drastically curtailed mining operations in the bituminous coal fields of Appalachia as the surplus of American coal continued to glut national and international markets. The Interior Department acquired a 1,100-acre farm at Reedsville, West Virginia, and established Arthurdale. The DSH approved plans for Arthurdale, named for the former owner of the farm, to serve as a colony for 200 families. Adhering to the principles established by the DSH Advisory Committee, the government personnel and community leaders subjected prospective clients to a series of tests.<sup>20</sup>

Those applicants who passed the initial screening with high marks for agricultural ability, physical fitness, attitude, and ambition received in-home inspections. After further reducing the applications by eliminating persons with tuberculosis and negative attitudes about farm life, the applications of 200 families gained approval from the increasingly bureaucratic and fragmented DSH administration. Approximately half the heads of households were unemployed coal miners, about one-fourth were former sawmill workers, and the remaining one-fourth were Appalachian farmers. The DSH

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<sup>19</sup> *Monthly Labor Review* (37): 1330. The Dayton project was the only DSH project in which the government did not own the land. In some other projects, later popularly associated with DSH projects but not part of the DSH, the government did not own the land and provided only managerial services. A good example of this type of project was the Deshee Farm in Indiana. See: Rebecca J. Thompson, "Deshee Farm: A New Deal Experiment With Cooperative Farming," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 91 (1995): 380-406.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 1329; Conkin 108.

plans called for a modest house and roughly five acres of tillable land for each family. The DSH projected that each family would require an expenditure of about \$2,000. Eleanor Roosevelt took a particular interest in the Arthurdale Project. Her interest in seeing for the comfort of the families and her pressure to hurry along the project, along with the experimental nature of such project building, produced delay (hastily assembled houses transported to the site were too flimsy for occupancy), waste, disorganization, and a resettlement cost to the DSH of over \$10,000 per family.<sup>21</sup>

Fears of local committees running amok and dispensing federal funds with a wholesome disregard for economy and fiduciary propriety, combined with Eleanor Roosevelt's aggressive interest in the DSH projects, eventually caused Ickes to move toward divesting his department of responsibility for the subsistence homestead program. Whereas the president and Ickes had envisioned the houses at Arthurdale as sturdy but plain and lacking indoor plumbing or electricity, Eleanor Roosevelt, along with Wilson and project director Bushrod Grimes, aimed for more personal conveniences. They insisted on indoor plumbing and electricity. In November 1933, the DSH had confidently predicted that the houses at Arthurdale would be occupied at a cost between \$2,000 and \$3,000. By March 1934, Grimes revised his cost estimate; each occupancy would cost over \$10,000. President Roosevelt advised Ickes that DSH "... could justify the cost because it was a model for other homestead projects." Ickes responded by asking, "... what it was a model of, since obviously it was not a model of low-cost housing for people

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<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*; Ickes, 152.

on the very lowest rungs of the economic order.”<sup>22</sup> Even the March 1934 estimates were low; the final cost for each of the homesteads at Arthurdale was \$16,635 (\$250,456). In 1935, the DSH transferred responsibilities to the Resettlement Administration, under the direction of Rexford G. Tugwell.<sup>23</sup>

Under the provision for “stranded populations,” the DSH established three other projects in addition to Arthurdale: Cumberland Homesteads near Crossville, Tennessee; Tygart Valley Homesteads, outside Elkins, West Virginia; and Westmoreland Homesteads at Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Each planned for from 250 to 300 units, and stretched the bounds of orthodoxy in the DSH advisory committee’s directive. They were the most problematic, expensive, and criticized of all DSH projects. It is interesting to note that the January 1935 *Monthly Labor Review* listed the designation of the Arthurdale project as “experimental” rather than “stranded populations.”<sup>24</sup>

#### The Tupelo Homesteads

By 1 March 1935, the DSH had approved forty-three projects. Of these, inclusive of the ones listed above, however, only thirty-four were completed by the DSH. The DSH designated one as “experimental,” one as “a resettlement community,” three as “farm communities,” one as “co-operative industrial,” and one as a “Garden city for

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<sup>22</sup>Ickes, 152.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*; Conkin, 153-153; 332.

<sup>24</sup>Conkin, 108: *Monthly Labor Review* (January 1935): 22.

Negroes.”<sup>25</sup> The experimental, stranded populations and farm communities were permissible under the advisory committee’s guidance, but they were not at the center of the aspirations and visions of the architects and planners of the subsistence homestead movement. The remaining twenty-four “industrial,” projects, best represented the hopes for a new economic entity and a reconciliation of agrarian and industrial dissonance.<sup>26</sup>

Of the twenty-four projects most representative of the ideas and the aspirations of President Roosevelt, M. L. Wilson, Rexford Tugwell, and others, six were located in Mississippi. In addition to the only fully completed DSH farm community at Richton, five industrial projects for Mississippi gained approval: Hattiesburg, Laurel, Meridian, McComb, and Tupelo. The DSH never began construction on the Laurel project; Hattiesburg and Meridian quickly defaulted and the houses were sold to individuals. The McComb project, which Professor Holley views as the most significant of the DSH communities, has a particularly woeful history. Only one client ever moved into the Eleanor Roosevelt Homesteads at McComb. The DSH sold the McComb houses to individuals.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Groves, Appendix, p.14. Conkin classifies Arthurdale as a “stranded community.” This is probably a more accurate reflection in operational terms but it contradicts the DSH terminology. Part of the story of Arthurdale involves the attempt to establish a factory with a contract with the U.S. Postal Service as a source of employment for the homesteaders. This provision met with opposition from representatives of furniture manufacturing areas. The Jersey Homesteads, another “stranded population” community was able to develop its own commercial textile operation, taking advantage of the skills of the homesteaders who, in the main, had been employed in that industry.

<sup>26</sup>*Monthly Labor Review* (January 1935):19-37; Groves, Appendix, 14; Conkin, 332-334.

<sup>27</sup>Conkin, 93-130. It is likely that Professor Holley did not have access to the archives of the Tupelo Homesteads. The archive assembly and custodial program did not commence

On 15 December 1933, the DSH announced plans for a twenty-five unit complex for Tupelo, Mississippi. The local board of directors of the Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi, a subsidiary of the Federal Subsistence Homestead Corporation (FSHC), represented the top echelon of community leadership. Its members included: R.V. Road, V. S. Whitesides, J. H. Leonard, L. A. Olsen, Mrs. T. F. Elkin, J. E. Redus, L. T. Wesson, J. M. Thomas, Jr., and Tupelo Mayor, J. P. Nanney. Operating under the original provisions of M. L. Wilson's management and organizational system, the board took action to identify quickly and place under option likely plots of land ranging in size from 160 to 650 acres on which to build the proposed homesteads.<sup>28</sup>

Two of the options granted but not exercised are of particular interest. Glenn McCullough granted an option to Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi. Almost seventy years later, McCullough's grandson, also named Glenn McCullough, accepted a position on the Board of Directors of the Tennessee Valley Authority; in 2001, he became Chairman. Bel-Air Golf Course, now owned by the city of Tupelo, was once the Tupelo

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at The Natchez Trace Parkway until the early 1990s. The Parkway staff assembled many of the records from other sources. Some of the materials on the Tupelo Homesteads were filed within the records of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Indeed, I found these records only because a staffer at NARA in Atlanta, Georgia suggested that I look at them. Much of the primary source material was and is in the Tennessee Valley Authority Records in NARA, Atlanta. There is little doubt that had Professor Holley been able to access these files, he would have written more extensively on Tupelo.

<sup>28</sup> Record Group 79, Department of Agriculture, Resettlement Administration, Management Division, file DO6619114-L14, "Summary and Justification: Tupelo Homesteads, SH-MS-6," 18 February, 1934, National Archives and Records Administration, Atlanta, GA. The composition of the Board of Directors changed throughout the corporation's brief existence. Resignations occurred with regularity, possibly because of the change in administration caused by Comptroller General McCarl's ruling and Ickes's desire to gain more centralized control. See: V.S. Whitesides letter to I. B. Bradshaw, March 6, 1934; W.F. Trapp, Associate Community

Country Club. On 5 January 1934, the Tupelo Country Club optioned its real estate to the Federal Subsistence Corporation for \$19,000. Should the option be exercised, the membership voted to build a new club. The Tupelo Homestead Corporation did not exercise that option and there is no language in the minutes indicating whether the option granted was motivated by financial difficulties or the desire for a new club.<sup>29</sup>

On 26 March 1934, the Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi purchased property from W. W. and W. M. Thompson. The property consisted of 170.58 acres of land, six miles north of Tupelo and bisected by the newly constructed U.S. Highway 45. The acreage, consisting of "pheba silk loam soil, well adapted to garden, truck and fruit, contained quite a bit of timber." At twenty dollars an acre, it was a good buy.<sup>30</sup>

The Thompson purchase proved to be an administrative headache. Shortly after the parties executed the contract, one of Thompson's neighbors challenged the sale on the basis that the land in question included a small portion which belonged to him, not

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Manager to J. B. Lawson, Assistant Regional Director, Resettlement Administration, June 21, 1937, all in the management division file noted above.

<sup>29</sup>RG 79, NARA, Atlanta, copies of options granted; *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*, Nov., 23, 1999; RG 79, 86-28-6-(300) "Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Stockholders of Tupelo Country Club," NARA, Atlanta. The options taken by the Tupelo Homestead Corporation reflect the quality of real estate desired. The Bel-Air area was and currently is a very desirable section of the city. This is, perhaps, an indication that the members of the board did not view potential homesteaders as welfare recipients. They did not view the potential homesteaders as people who would drive down property values or create unpleasant neighborhoods. Likewise, the McCullough property optioned was then and is now very valuable and desirable real estate in Tupelo. In the 1960s, the Tupelo Country Club did establish a new golf course. Based on limited information one could assume that the delay of some thirty years in building a new club indicates that the club optioned its property in hopes of improving its financial condition rather than to satisfy a desire for a new club.



Thompson. The law firm of Deavours and Hilbun represented the DSH and, through a barrage of letters to and from the Thompsons, finally gained a "no objection" statement from the Attorney General to the commencement of construction on 10 May 1935.<sup>31</sup>

There remained a degree of uncertainty relative to the budget of the Tupelo Homesteads throughout its life. Figures submitted to the DSH fluctuated as construction manager C. T. Ames waffled between building twenty-two, twenty-five, or thirty-five units. Finally, Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi submitted a budget of \$58,350 and received approval for, "... the development and the perfection of a Demonstration in Subsistence Homestead Gardening to be located adjacent to the corporate limits of the City of Tupelo, County of Lee, Mississippi."<sup>32</sup> Even after approval, Ames requested modifications to the Tupelo Homesteads budget. I. R. Bradshaw explained to Washington officials that the \$58,350 budget was "apparently arbitrarily set" and that the Tupelo Homesteads should have no trouble qualifying for \$75,000.

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<sup>30</sup>RG 79, Letter to I.R. Bradshaw, V S. Whitesides, March 6, 1934; W.C. Inzer, Lee County Extension Agent, to I.R. Bradshaw, January 13, 1934. Of the almost 171 acres, 114 acres were purchased at \$20. The remaining 56 acres cost \$50 per acre.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., Thomas K. Shuffig, Office of the Attorney General, letter to Paul D. Shriver, Chief Counsel Division of Subsistence Homesteads, May 10, 1935; J. B. Lawson, project manager to Deavours and Hilbun," April 13, 1935; "Inter-Office communication, Charles E. Pynchon to J.B. Lawson, December 18, 1934; W. W. Thompson to V.S. Whitesides, March 14, 1934. The communications cited above, and many others not cited, reveal severe administrative problems. In addition to contested ownership was the mistaken notion that part of the land represented a portion of the Thompson homestead. This matter was not fully resolved until 1937. No evidence exists that this lack of resolution had any deleterious effect on the individual residents' attitudes about, or plans concerning, the homesteads.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., "Schedule XVI"; J. B. Lawson to S. N. Perkins, Assistant Chief, DSH, 23 June 1934."

During the period of wrangling over the budget and examination of the property title, DSH officials evidently worried about losing popular support. Bradshaw telegraphed N. S. Perkins, assistant chief of the Construction Section:

In my opinion Lawson will go through successfully under revised budget June twentythird (*sic*) please approve this and lets get the houses started STOP We are fast losing public sentiment on account delay. (*sic*)<sup>33</sup>

*The Tupelo Journal* ran a glowing account of the efficiency and economy practiced by Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi and the Division of Subsistence Housing. The newspaper noted:

Although the fact has not been officially announced, it is learned that a considerable portion of the \$80,000 appropriation for the Tupelo project will be turned back to the government. It is officially learned that the Tupelo Homestead has been constructed at lower cost than expected.<sup>34</sup>

*The Tupelo Journal* was evidently not aware of the "sliding" budget for the Tupelo project. In the same article, *The Journal* reported that officials in Washington were, "... loud in their praise for Jimmy Lawson," the project director.<sup>35</sup> The newspaper was not aware of other communication from Washington. The DSH bluntly informed Lawson that if he had been:

... able to go through with the government purchasing materials and contracting labor, you could have had your houses half finished and still remained under budget. ... Your overhead of \$4,500 is entirely out of line ...

The letter did go on to say that the blame could be placed on the DSH because, "... we have dragged this project along with various regulations of different kinds until the

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., Telegram I. R. Bradshaw to N. S. Jenkins, 25 June 1934. Bradshaw telegraphed Jenkins from Laurel, MS, where another project had been approved.

<sup>34</sup>*Tupelo Journal*, 21 November 1934.

overhead could not be cut.”<sup>36</sup> The “various kinds of regulations” reflected Ickes’s increasing concern about the fiscal and managerial integrity of DSH operations.

Despite the increasing bureaucratic minutiae incurred as a result of Ickes’s dismantling of Wilson’s streamlined protocols, despite the waffling over how many houses to build and where to place them on the property, and notwithstanding the fluctuating proposed budget, the work proceeded at a remarkably fast pace. On 18 July 1934, Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi awarded a contract of \$50,600 to Tupelo Lumber Company for construction of twenty-five houses, septic tanks, and outbuildings. The houses, designed by local architect Frank Kincannon, were completed October 15.<sup>37</sup>

David O. Puckett owned the Tupelo Lumber Company; his son, David O. Puckett Jr., remembers the whirl of activity involved with the construction:

I had my own delivery truck, it wasn’t new but it was mine and I remember making many a delivery of building supplies to the site. I was only fourteen at the time but I had been driving forever. I remember that during those days you couldn’t hire a decent carpenter in Tupelo, we had all of them working for us.<sup>38</sup>

The New Deal’s significant presence in Northeast Mississippi, or at least the promise of it, preceded the announcement of approval and construction of the Tupelo Homesteads. On October 27, 1933, the city of Tupelo signed an agreement with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) contracting for power and mapping of a huge direct

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>RG 79, SH-MS-6, I. R. Bradshaw letter to J. B. Lawson, 25 June 1934.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., “Summary and justification.”

<sup>38</sup>David O. Puckett Jr., interview by author, 1 September 1999, Tupelo, MS. The tape recording is in the author’s possession.

power transmission line. This agreement supplied Tupelo with a public relations slogan still used by the city to this day: "Tupelo, First TVA City." Then, even as now, Tupelo gloried in the possibilities offered by this government business. The local newspaper reporter waxed enthusiastic; little journalistic objectivity colored his account:

The New Deal in-so-far as Tupelo and the surrounding trade territory are concerned is in a fairer way toward achievement than had been conceived in the minds of any, with the exception of the most optimistic, and, before the new year has hardly been ushered in, the long proposed reduced rates will apply to city and farm homes alike.

The subheading of the story promised the line would be in operation by February and a smaller header promised a 68 percent rate cut.<sup>39</sup> The TVA actually performed more rapidly than it promised. On 27 September 1934, before the Tupelo Homesteads were completed, the Tupelo Homesteads Corporation granted an easement to the TVA, to supply electrical power to the homesteads.<sup>40</sup>

The confluence of these two New Deal programs, the DSH and the TVA, along with a third New Deal-generated project, proved to be an enormous boon to the Tupelo Homesteads. In the early 1930s, the Natchez, Mississippi, Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), began enlisting the aid of other chapters and interested groups to pressure the federal government to map and preserve the historic Natchez Trace. As a result of their efforts, the Emergency Legislation Act of June 1934

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<sup>39</sup>*The Tupelo Journal*, 31 October 1933.

<sup>40</sup>RG 79, SH-MS-6, C. T. Ames, "Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi Inc."; "Charles Pynchon letter to J.B. Lawson. As the project neared completion, under the new regulations imposed by Ickes, the local group was required to form a local corporation

authorized initial construction funds. Further legislation in 1938 established the Natchez Trace Parkway as a national parkway under the National Park Service. The physical confluence of three separate strains of New Deal thought in Northeast Mississippi was, arguably, an indication of the importance and power of Congressman John Rankin and Senator Pat Harrison.<sup>41</sup>

With the creation of the TVA, the New Deal harvested the fruits of progressive labor. Tennessee Valley area representatives and progressives had supported ideas similar to the TVA for years. During the Great War, the U.S. Army built a hydroelectric dam at Muscle Shoals on the Tennessee River in order to supply the armed services with weapons-grade nitrates. At the end of the war the military, no longer needing the nitrate fixing facilities, mothballed the installation. The disposition of those facilities actuated a struggle between capitalistic entrepreneurs and progressive conservationists for control of the dam. Pursuing notions first advanced by Gifford Pinchot, Chief U.S. Forester under President Theodore Roosevelt, progressives, led by Senator George Norris, insisted that the shoals area of the Tennessee River and the hydroelectric dam built there redound to the good of man and the health of the environment. As head of the Senate Agriculture

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with different provisions than the one involved in initial planning and construction. The Tupelo Homesteads Corporation replaced Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi.

<sup>41</sup>Federal Recalled Records, NATR, Accession #290, Box 40, Natchez Trace Parkway Archives; "Natchez Trace Parkway Home Page," accessed 14 October 1999. Martha Swain, "Hubert D. Stephens: Mississippi's 'Quiet Man' in the Senate, 1923-1935," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 63, (4), (Winter 2001): 276-77. For a discussion concerning Pat Harrison's value to FDR in congressional approval of New Deal legislation see Martha M. Swain, *Pat Harrison: The New Deal Years* (Jackson: The University and College Press of Mississippi, 1975): *passim*. Chester H. Gray, "Putting More Muscle in the Shoals," *Bureau Farmer*, 3 (4) (Dec 1927): 12-13. Tupelo was also awarded other New Deal works projects. They included a mattress factory and a meat

Committee, Norris occupied a key position in which to block acquisition of the shoals facilities by strictly commercial interests. When Henry Ford, seeing the commercial opportunities inherent in a hydroelectric facility, offered \$5 million for a project that had cost the government \$130 million, Norris thundered that the committee's acceptance of the bid would "... amount to the greatest gift ever bestowed upon mortal man since salvation was made free to the human race."<sup>42</sup>

On 10 April 1933, the hopes of Norris and the old time progressives turned to substance. When FDR asked Congress for "legislation to create a Tennessee Valley Authority – a corporation clothed with the power of government but possessed of the flexibility and initiative of private enterprise" Congress enacted the legislation on May 18, 1933.<sup>43</sup>

At about the same time that Congress created TVA, the DSH gave a description of the proposed Tupelo homesteads:

... a house and outbuildings located upon a plot of land on which can be grown a large portion of the foodstuffs required by the homestead family. It signifies production for home consumption and not for commercial sale. In that it provides for subsistence alone, it carries with it the corollary that cash income must be drawn from some outside source. The central motive of the subsistence homestead program, therefore, is to demonstrate the

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packing facility. The meat packing facility processed cattle that the government purchased from drought-stricken Midwest cattlemen.

<sup>42</sup>Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt: The Politics of Upheaval* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960), 134-139. The quote is from: Tennessee Valley Authority, "A History of the Tennessee Valley Authority," 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, 6, no publication data given.

<sup>43</sup>Tennessee Valley Authority, 17.

economic value of a livelihood which combines part-time wage work with part-time gardening or farming.<sup>44</sup>

The Tupelo Homesteads' construction adhered to the definition. The community initially consisted of twenty-five houses on lots averaging a little over three acres each, and included nine three-room houses, eight four-room houses, and eight five-room houses. Each house received water from a deep well equipped with an electric pump capable of delivering 225 gallons per hour and a pump-house enclosing the mechanism. As the planners anticipated that each homesteader would keep a cow, chickens, and hogs, each unit came equipped with a cow stall, chicken run, and hog pen. The DSH provided each homestead with fruit trees, berry bushes, farming equipment, fertilizer, seed, a cow, two shoats, and twenty-five chickens. Project managers arranged with the DSH, the County Extension Service, and Mississippi State College to provide guidance in gardening, canning, and preservation of food. Each kitchen came furnished with a pressure cooker, a relatively new innovation, and supplies for home canning.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike most of the other industrial homesteads, Tupelo Homesteads had running water, electricity, and single-party phone lines. The Homesteads were near enough to Tupelo for the children of the community to utilize the transportation facilities of the Tupelo Municipal School District. Likewise, proximity to Tupelo precluded the need for construction of community cultural, medical, and religious facilities. Construction crews

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<sup>44</sup>Conkin, quotes at 110-111.

<sup>45</sup>RG 79, SH-MS-6, Schedule XVI"; Ames, 1-2.

built an earthen dam across a ravine, which provided a recreational lake for the homesteaders.<sup>46</sup>

On Friday, 16 November 1934, the first homesteaders moved into their new homes. Two days later, the President and Eleanor Roosevelt, along with Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, came to Tupelo; the President came to extol the virtues of the TVA and Mrs. Roosevelt to visit the homesteaders. Before speaking to an estimated 75,000 people at Robbins Field in Tupelo, the party visited the Tupelo Homesteads.<sup>47</sup>

Prior to the visit, the Tupelo Garden Club had extended an invitation for Eleanor Roosevelt to speak at a special meeting in her honor, which she declined. Knowing of her interest in the Arthurdale Project, and wanting to honor the First Lady, the women of the Tupelo Garden Club carefully prepared and decorated two of the vacant homesteads for her inspection. Mrs. Roosevelt, however, insisted on visiting a homestead family. She stopped, at random, at Number 20, the Barron residence. Mrs. Roosevelt became so engrossed in conversation with Mrs. Barron and in examining the house and the appliances that she strained the patience of the President. FDR, waiting impatiently in his car, sent one of his staff members to "fetch her."<sup>48</sup>

FDR's visit constituted the high water mark of the Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi. Contrary to expectations, none of the initial residents bought their homes.

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<sup>46</sup>*Tupelo Journal*; (Jackson) *Daily Clarion Ledger*; *New York Times*; (Jackson) *Commercial Appeal*, all of 19 November, 1934. Ickes, 226.

<sup>46</sup>*Ibid.* The dam broke in the early 1960 and was not repaired.

<sup>46</sup> *Tupelo Journal*, November 19, 1934



They thought the price the government placed on the project too high, and they did not fully understand that they were expected to buy shares in the entire corporation and that only after 75% of the aggregate debt had been paid would they receive title to their property in fee-simple. The project passed with bewildering rapidity to the control of other government agencies, and with such transfer became associated with welfare programs. By 1937, the homesteads had become a place to rent until one could make better arrangements.

By the President's own hopes and the DSH standards, Tupelo was not an ideal place to nurture the aspirations of the economically challenged via this type of governmental assistance. When FDR outlined the homestead program to Congress he spoke of potential clients who earned from \$600 to \$1,000 (\$15,555 - 19,333) per year. By providing a way for a person to buy a home at low interest rates (3%) on long terms (40 years), the president expected that there would be a surfeit of qualified applicants. He was correct; there was a surplus of applicants. The president also talked about the fiscal and moral qualifications of applicants; he stressed that this was not a relief program. The government, he said, would recover all its money; the beneficiaries of this program were to be persons of good moral character, financial integrity, and strong work ethics.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup>*Tupelo Journal*, 19 November 1934.

<sup>49</sup>Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Volume 2: *Year of Crises, 1933* (New York: Random House, 1938), 290-294. Originally, the DSH planned for 40-year mortgages, however, all actual agreements called for 30-year amortization. In the 1930s thirty-year mortgages financing personal residences were nearly non-existent. Contemporary long-term home mortgages became more-or-less standard only with the return of service men from their war-time service.

There were plenty of such people in Tupelo, they just were not likely to submit to regimented and standardized detail, nor were they likely to submit to ownership provisions at variance with fee-simple occupancy. Tupelo was different from most other small Mississippi towns. With a population of 6,000, over 2,000 were industrial workers. The average per capita income of the first homesteaders was actually between \$1,300 and \$1,900 (\$20,022 - 29,555) per year. Contrary to the initial guidelines, every head of household in the Tupelo Homesteads held full-time employment. Compared to the residents of other industrial projects established by DSH, many of which were located in far more prosperous regions than Tupelo, the Tupelo Homesteaders' incomes ranked among the highest. Of all the DSH projects, the Tupelo Homesteaders ranked fifth in terms of family income. Clearly, the Tupelo Homesteaders did not represent the clientele the president had originally envisioned.<sup>50</sup>

Applicants for homesteads at Tupelo underwent the same rigorous examinations as applicants for all DSH and RA subsistence projects. The homestead association forwarded applications to a committee of local volunteers; the volunteers forwarded selected applications back to the homestead association. The state committee, chaired by I. B. Bradshaw and Mississippi State College home management specialist Anne Jordan,

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<sup>50</sup>RG 79, "Summary and Justification."; Groves, 60. The *Tupelo Journal*, 19 November 1934 listed the initial homesteaders and their employment status. The newspaper listed James Barron as a part-time employee of the Nehi Bottling Company. However, Mr. Barron's application and occupancy contract listed his annual income as \$1,600 per year. It is likely that Mr. Barron worked a full week. If not his income from part-time employment compared very favorably to full-time workers. There seems to have been some subterfuge with regard to some of the applicants' statement of financial resources. Many of the homesteaders, Mrs. Perkins, for instance, owned other property.

then screened the applications. Finally, the national DSH Committee, chaired by Charlotte Smith, made the final selection.

Banks Livingston, a long-time Tupelo resident and local historian, remembers the Tupelo Homesteads and the attitude of the community toward the Homesteaders. They were not, he said, thought of as being on relief; there was no stigma attached to being a homesteader. In fact, he thought, the community viewed the homesteaders as one might view contest winners. Times were tough; maybe they could make this pay off to their advantage. They might choose to stay there and they might not.<sup>51</sup>

Strangely, it was the infamous tornado of April 1936 that spelled doom for the Tupelo Homesteads. The tornado created a wide swath of destruction in Tupelo, demolishing hundreds of homes and businesses. The resulting building boom created a localized economic revival. Scores of new homes and apartments, many of higher quality than the Tupelo Homesteads, came on the market. The original homesteaders now had a better economic environment and more housing options.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>Banks Livingston, interview by author, 10 November 1999; the tape is in author's possession.

<sup>52</sup>Kathleen Perkins, interview by Sara Amy Leach and Leslie Blythe, 17 April 1977, transcript, Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files, Tupelo, MS. Vaughn L. Grisham, Jr., *Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community* (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999), 87, 134. The intense but short-term lack of housing created a barrage of letters to the Resettlement Administration and from prominent Tupelo citizens and Congressman Rankin and Senator Harrison. The RA had approved an additional project for Tupelo in 1936. This new project, Tupelo Industrial Garden Community, was to provide seventy homes for white and thirty for black occupancy. Although land had been placed under option and the budget approved, the RA used the funds to help provide relief for farmers in the drought-stricken Midwest. The new Tupelo project was never built. It would have been the fourth of Tugwell's Garden Cities. See: RG 83, Records of the Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, USDA Files, NARA, College Park, MD.

By 1937, the circumstances of the typical homesteader had changed. None of the original homesteaders contracted to buy their homes. Since many of the new residents replacing the original homesteaders were employees of the TVA and the National Park Service, and were assigned to the Tupelo area on a temporary or rotational basis, they had no intention of buying their homes and opted for month-to-month rental occupancy.<sup>53</sup>

The homesteaders were initially given two contract options. Contract A called for a two-year lease, after which time the homesteader was to pay twenty-five percent of the selling price of the homestead and begin mortgage payments. This sales price, not established until the local corporation assumed ownership of the entire project, was an item of contention. The two-year lease period was designed by the DSH to allow residents time to accumulate the down payment. Equally important, the two-year period was to serve as a sort of probationary period. Some homesteaders might prove unreliable or disruptive. The building boom in Tupelo after the tornado caused the homestead property to be less valuable. From 1936 to 1940, the local Homesteaders were in constant conflict with the government over the fair market value of the properties.<sup>54</sup>

Contract B was a month-to-month rental agreement. Both contracts were non-binding on the homesteaders. Only after entering into a purchase agreement were the Homesteaders required to fulfill long-term obligations. None of the Homesteaders

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<sup>53</sup>RG 79, copies of applications, leases, and letters of inquiry; Perkins interview, Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files,.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid.

exercised their purchase option and, thus, the Homesteaders were free to move at their convenience. The federal government had become, in effect, a tenant landlord.<sup>55</sup>

In May 1937, the Resettlement Administration (RA), which had taken over from the DSH, formed the Tupelo Homesteads Corporation, to replace the defunct Tupelo Homesteads of Mississippi, Inc., and authorized the newly-formed association to buy the project for \$110,000. In view of the fact that the project had cost \$149,290, the RA administrators believed that they had offered the local corporation a very good deal. The local association turned it down. On October 1, 1938, after arguments, reappraisals, and reconsideration, the association finally agreed to purchase the project for \$73,182. In terms of 2006 dollars, the RA offered houses, which had cost an average of \$59,882 to construct and equip, for sale for \$31,480.<sup>56</sup>

The Tupelo Homesteads Corporation had no more success with the project than had its federal predecessor. While vacancies were rare because of the low rents and the

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid.

<sup>56</sup>Conkin, 334. As mentioned earlier, the estimated budget for the Tupelo Homesteads was in the \$50,000 to \$80,000 range; why the discrepancy? Part of the answer is in the increased inefficiency that came as a function of more centralized control following the Comptroller General's rulings and Ickes' micro-management. However, the biggest reason is that in 1936 under pressure from Tugwell, Director of RA, ten additional units were built at Tupelo. These new units were technically not part of the DSH program, they were designated as a "garden community" under the auspices of the RA. Some evidence indicates that Tugwell intended for the new addition to actually be the fourth of his "greenbelt communities." The drought cattle purchase effort dried up funds intended for the project. However, since they were situated on the property bought for the Tupelo Homesteads and since they were separated from the original houses only by U.S. Highway 45, they were added to the Tupelo Homesteads and offered to the association as part of the Homesteads. These ten houses, unlike the originals are composed of brick veneer. They are obviously of another mind-set regarding subsistence housing.

need for temporary quarters for workers involved in constructing the TVA and the Natchez Trace Parkway, no one, it seemed, cared to own a "subsistence homestead." The delays, regulations, and duplication of efforts actuated by the DSH insistence on centralized control removed the efficiencies available through local knowledge. The homesteaders found better construction at lower prices available in the community. Even by its own admission, the homesteads were inferior in materials and construction to homes available through the private sector.<sup>57</sup>

In late 1939, the National Park Service commenced conversations with the Tupelo Homestead Corporation concerning the Parkway's acquisition of the homesteads. The Tupelo project still experienced trouble with delinquencies, turnovers, and the continued lack of home buyers. The Parkway employees complained of high rents in Jackson and Tupelo was very near the center of the Trace. These two factors, coupled with the nature of the Tupelo Homesteads' occupancy problems, made the acquisition of the homesteads by the Park service attractive. On 31 October 1940, the National Park Service assumed ownership of the Tupelo Homesteads and made them a part of the Natchez Trace Parkway. To accommodate the inclusion of the properties, surveyors diverted the path of the Trace eastward so that the property now fell within the path of the Trace.<sup>58</sup>

The Natchez Trace also moved its headquarters to Tupelo. Workers from a "stub" Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp at Plantersville helped Parkway workers

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<sup>57</sup>Perkins interview; *A Place on Earth*, 47-49.

<sup>58</sup>Holley, 120; "Summary and Justification"; *National Register of Historic Places Registration Form*; Banks Livingston interview; "Report on the Tupelo Homesteads, Lee County, Mississippi," January 29, 1940, Natchez Trace Parkway General Files; *Natchez*

combine three of the houses to form office space, moved four dwellings to widen the road shoulders, and the Park Service retained fifteen as employee quarters. The surplus houses remained available for rent until the last of the pre-trace acquisition renters vacated in 1953. Since 1953, all the remaining houses have been used as employee quarters.<sup>59</sup>

Today, the Tupelo Homesteads look very much like they looked in the 1930s. In the mid 1950s, the Park Service made some changes, primarily the addition or enclosure of porches and the addition of windows. The Tupelo Homesteads, along with the Cumberland Homesteads, are the only New Deal communities of the one hundred built that retain their architectural, structural, and environmental integrity. Park Service ownership kept the Tupelo Homesteads from sale to individuals, thereby avoiding significant structural alteration.<sup>60</sup>

Transference to the National Park Service made relationships between landlord and tenants even more grievous. Tenants did not understand the new provisions imposed by the National Park Service. Since Park employees assumed priority, some tenants, even those who had invested in purchases for improvement of their homesteads, were asked to vacate their homes, even though other houses were vacant. Many tenants were not informed of the changed nature of the property. When Mr. B. M. Anthony and his wife were reprimanded for conducting target practice (on an oak tree) on their "property"

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*Trace Parkway Bulletin*, Vol.1, no. 1, June, 1940, Natchez, MS; *Natchez Trace Bulletin*, Vol 1, nos.2&3, November 1940 and January, 1941, Jackson, MS.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., nos. 2&3; Date given by Roger Stubblefield, Natchez Trace Parkway, in conversation with author.

<sup>60</sup>*National Register of Historic Places.*

they were not convinced that the Park Ranger, Claude A Wagner, Jr., had the authority to interfere, and allowed that it was, "none of his damn business, anyway." Ranger Wagner responded by informing Mr. Anthony that the Park Service would dictate to him what he could plant and, furthermore, the efforts he made to enclose a cow and other animals were moot, since no farm animals would henceforth be allowed on Parkway property. After Ranger Wagner explained that the property was part of the National Park Service and that certain regulations regarding firearms were mandated by federal law and after a soothing letter of explanation from Acting Superintendent Malcolm Gardner, Mr. Anthony was somewhat mollified. However, Ranger Wagner, in his report of the incident to Gardner, indicated a certain appreciation of regional peculiarities and a bit of wariness about them: "Mr. Anthony is, I believe, a warm blooded southerner, native to this region, and a firm believer in individual rights, and from his attitude I knew he resented being asked to stop his target practice. His letter more than sustains my analysis of his character and temperament."<sup>61</sup>

This neighborhood, quiet and secure, free from traffic, sits behind the Tupelo Visitors Center on the Natchez Trace Parkway. There are no signs informing passers-by of the genesis or philosophical motivations or the human drama associated with the Tupelo Homesteads; there is no information linking the Trace itself or the hidden houses to efforts of the government to help people endure the Great Depression. There is no

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<sup>61</sup>B.M. Anthony to Malcolm Gardner, Acting Superintendent,. 11 November 1940; Memorandum for Mr. Smith from Claude A. Wagner, Jr., Park Ranger, Nov 13, 1940; other letters of complaint from tenants as well as the Anthony, Wagner, and Gardner communications, all in: NATR Accession #290, Box 8, Folder 98, Natchez Trace Archives.



remembrance of the President or the First Lady at #20. There is no monument in the back yard of #7 to mark the gravesite of a baby girl.<sup>62</sup>

The Tupelo Homesteaders were middle class white people who were temporarily distressed by the Great Depression. The qualifying procedures ensured that the colonists were ambitious and hard-working people with some economic skills. As a result, the Colony failed to attract permanent residents. The Tupelo Colonists were not willing to lower their aspirations to that of subsistence gardening and part-time work. They were too successful and confident to settle for a subsistence homestead

The DSH projects were not designed to address the country's number one economic problem; they were not created to give succor to the downtrodden. The clientele of the DSH projects in general, and the Tupelo Homesteads in particular, were middle class folks who needed a place to regroup and reassume their particular notions of good living and community. About the same time that the first homesteaders moved in at Tupelo, other folks were moving into new homes just over in the Arkansas Delta. The Colonists at Dyess were among the most destitute and most desperate plain whites in the United States. At Dyess, Arkansas, the New Deal tried its own form of alchemy. The bosses at Dyess did not try to turn base metal or precious metal into gold; they tried to

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<sup>62</sup>The interviewee, by last account (1999) is still living. The author sees no good reason for revealing his identity in view of the fact that such revelation serves no valid historical purpose and that such revelation would most likely revisit an area of intense emotional pain and guilt. It was illegal in the 1930s, as it is now, to bury corpses privately.

\_\_\_\_\_, Interview by Sara Amy Leach, transcript, Natchez Trace Parkway Archives, General Files. A copy of the transcript is retained by this writer.

resurrect and recreate an American not seen since the late seventeenth century – the American peasant-yeoman.

## CHAPTER IV

### **“FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE PEACE, HEALTH, AND SAFETY OF THE PUBLIC OF ARKANSAS”**

***“What class of people will be elegitable to thease farms (sic)?*** Melvin Raley, De Queen, AR, 17 September 1934

***“... we are share croppers on the Ark River bottoms. Mr. Griffin (my husband) is now in his 70<sup>th</sup> year. We are too old and broke down to continue this kind of work. We have put forth effort far beyond our strength to keep off relief. [We] have never had to ask any one for any help. But now we are broke down ...”*** (Mrs.) W.A. Griffin, Sherrill, AR, 23 September 1934.

***“How down and out must a man be before he can get in on it?”*** F. M. Wauhole, Fargo, OK, 7 July 1934.

***“The corn didn’t tassle (sic). The oats didn’t get big enough to mow. The peas didn’t come up. The tomatoes are standing just like we put them out, haven’t grown at all. The peanuts haven’t a peanut on them. . .”*** Mr. and Mrs. S. J. Barton, Springdale, AR, 1 August 1934.<sup>1</sup>

Dyess Colony, the largest of all New Deal relief/rehabilitation communities, proved to be one of the most troublesome and contentious of the agrarian programs. It cost a little over \$3 million, it was only mildly successful, and that success was glimmering, passing, and short-lived. Dispossessed whites encountered a bewildering succession of agencies, assorted paperwork, and differences of opinion as they worked to gain yeomanry status. The new, and to some cloistering, close association of government employees, regulations, terminology and the ever-changing nature of New Deal ministrations created tensions between the plain whites and their bosses. The Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA), the American Farm Bureau Federation

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to W. R. Dyess from Melvin Raley, 17 September 1934; letter to Bureau of Agriculture from W.A Griffin, wife and 14 year old son; letter to W. R. Dyess from F.M. Wauhole, 9 July 1934; letter to W. R. Dyess from Mr. and Mrs. S. J. Barton, 1 August 1934, all in University of Arkansas, Special Collections, WPA Administration File, MS UN 3, hereinafter referred to as “WPA Administration File.”

(AFBF), the Agricultural Extension Service, and the southern Democratic power base attacked both the programs and the philosophy of New Deal agrarian relief/rehabilitation programs. While the New Deal contended with internal divisions and external attacks, dispossessed whites in Dyess were left to mind their own business and to do as the supervisors said. Some of them sought to cooperate fully with the government no matter in what alphabet agency manifestation it appeared, others murmured and agitated for change. Some tried to manipulate the system – and some did.

Dyess, Arkansas had no traditions. There were no stories and legends of early founders, no heroic tales of fleeing the floods or surviving malaria – or Yankees. It had no history. Almost overnight, a thriving community of about 3,000 souls became residents of an instant city. Apparently, the town was born mature; there was no transition from crude trading posts and hovels of rough lumber to modern buildings. All Dyess buildings were brand new. The town was a little odd; Rexford (“Rex the Red”) Tugwell’s New Deal co-conspirators had equipped the town with a gin, swimming pool, school, community center, gristmill, slaughterhouse, blacksmith shop, lumberyard, railroad depot, hospital, service station, garage, general store, café, grocery store, and other ancillary services and thirty-two houses. “Government men” occupied the houses.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Dyess Colony Inc,” typed narrative with references to letters, RA inspection reports, RG 96, FSA and Predecessor Agencies, Project Records, 1934-1940, AK 80, Box 181, ACC 59A-I2I3. This Document is divided into several sections. Hereinafter this source cited as “Dyess Colony Inc,” with the appropriate Section. “Dyess Colony Inc, Background History”; “Resume of Procedures and Problems of Planning Inspection Trips and Moving Families to Dyess Colony; F. J. Hemmen, “Detailed Report of Visit to the Dyess Rural Industrial Community Near Osceola, Arkansas Under the Direction of Federal Emergency Relief Administration,” all in RG 96 AK-80 003, hereinafter RG 96 ; *The (Dyess, AR) Colony Herald*, 22 May, 1936; *The Commercial Appeal*, 5 November 1936; *The Mississippi County Sentinel*, 22 May 1936; “National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form, Dyess Colony, n.d.” RG 96; *Southwest Times*

It seemed like a good idea at the time. William Dyess, levy contractor, mule dealer, politician, cotton baron, and Director of the Arkansas Emergency Relief Administration, had access to a huge Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) grant, thousands of acres of abandoned and tax-defaulted Delta land, and thousands of dispossessed plain whites within a fifty-mile radius of his Mississippi County, Arkansas home. According to H.C. Baker, a close associate, William R. Dyess,

conceived the idea of building an agricultural community. A colony of five hundred homes – homes which were to be modern, liveable (*sic*) homes with electricity, running water, private sewage and other advantages usually associated only with urban communities, and which would raise the standard for farm homes to a new high level. He conceived in his plan a hospital, schools, churches, in fact a new order of things for those who through no fault of their own found it almost impossible to make their way.<sup>3</sup>

There is no evidence of how Dyess managed to reconcile the obvious dilemmas that his notions created. His success as a planter was in large measure due to his exploitation of the very labor system that his project threatened. He imagined, at first 800, then 700, and finally 500 families in neat modern houses reaping a competence from the most fecund agricultural land in the world. Dyess and his colleagues very quickly

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*Record*, 20 May 1934; *Arkansas Gazette*, 10 June 1977; *Arkansas Democrat*, 29 December 1934. References to “government men” are ubiquitous in the correspondence files, for example see: letter to W. R Dyess from Jesi A. Chance, 14 October 1934, University of Arkansas, Special Collections, “U.S. Works Progress Administration File, hereinafter “WPA Administration File. Like many things at Dyess, notions changed quickly. Dyess planed for 40 residences, but in fact the Colony only built 32. See “Resume of Procedures” RG 96.

<sup>3</sup> H. C. Baker, “Dyess Colony,” in *Traveling Recovery Road: The Story of Relief, Work-Relief and Rehabilitation in Arkansas, August 30, 1932 to November 15, 1936* (Little Rock: Emergency Relief Administration, 1936), 153. The original plans called for the establishment of 750 families on a 20-acre plot. Originally, there was to be no modification of farm sizes because of exceptional circumstances. For reference to the change in philosophy, see: Letter to Harry Hopkins from Floyd Sharp, 20 May 1937, RG 96.

altered their notions about the cookie-cutter one-size-fits-all economic units and planned for 500 families on plots of land consistent with family needs and the labor force of each family. His colonization project, as suggested by its name, Colonization Project No. 1, was to be only the first. Although President Roosevelt had promised a New Deal from the bottom up, he bowed to political necessity and expediency. The New Deal aggressively propped up the traditional pillars of wealth and control of agrarian America, most energetically in the Delta. Perhaps Dyess felt comfortable with his potential conflict of interest activities because the cotton barons had much better-connected, financed, and powerful advocates – the American Farm Bureau Federation and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). Dyess identified, personally, with the Arkansas cotton barons. At the time of Dyess Colony's creation, his colleagues and neighbors were busy brutalizing evicted cotton cultivators; in response to such wholesale violence dispossessed white and black cotton cultivators formed the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) in adjacent Cross County. Asked about the alleged wholesale evictions of neighboring sharecroppers, Dyess claimed that he saw no more cropper migration this season (1934) than any other crop-year. By providing to prosperous farmers (cotton barons in particular) generous benefits, it most likely appeared to Dyess, with good reason, that the AAA would more than adequately safeguard the interests of cotton barons. Presumably freed from intolerable pangs of conscience, Dyess submitted plans and received approval for "Colonization Project No. 1." Harry Hopkins, supported by Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, approved the project in March 1934.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Letter to Hon. Harry L. Hopkins from Floyd Sharp 20 May 1937, RG 96; letter to Colonel Lawrence Westbrook from William R. Dyess, 30 November 1934, University of Arkansas Special Collections, WPA Management File. Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's*

### The Bosses at Dyess

At least two phenomena differentiate the Dyess Colony from most other New Deal programs. The leadership of and at Dyess was atypically constant. The top echelon of officials at Dyess tended to leave their posts only on the most dramatic conditions; William Dyess died and the Board of Directors of Dyess Colony fired Colonel Lawrence Westbrook. (Even after The Dyess Board fired Westbrook from his consultant position, the Colonel continued to be an ally.) The continuity of the officials and the colony's existence outside the direction of New Deal Agencies (WPA and RA), made Dyess Colony an inviting target for New Deal critics. In 1939, the political danger cited above caused Dyess Colony to seek refuge under the aegis of the Farm Security Administration (FSA), created in 1937. Furthermore, the odd legal status for Dyess meant that the Colony was treated as any other entity in its application for government acreage allotments, relief eligibility certification, and yet was required to apply to its clients the provisions of the current agricultural relief program. Although technically free from direct authority of the FERA, WPA, RA, and the AAA, each of those agencies imposed particular and specific procedures. For example, each of the agencies in its turn and by its own guidelines determined the amount of "furnish" available to each of the Colonists. Thus, even though their situation at Dyess Colony created different problems but offered expanded opportunities compared to FERA, WPA, and RRC clients, the same guidelines and regulations applied. Likewise, the Colonists were required to execute the same budget and farm plans, as were the RRC Rehabilitators and RA clients. All of the cotton

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*Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 33, 36.

cultivators and would-be yeoman farmers were constrained by the acreage quotas assigned by the AAA county production committees, dominated by cotton barons, County Extension Agents and American Farm Bureau Federation officers and functionaries. In addition to the foregoing grounds of dissension, the fierce political battles in Arkansas between the "Federal crowd" and the "statehouse bunch" complicated the Colony's existence. U.S. Senators Joseph T. Robinson and Hattie Caraway were the most prominent members of the Federal element. William Dyess, Ben Butler (a Mississippi County implement dealer and vocal supporter of the colony), and Floyd Sharp led the local "statehouse" forces. The resulting statehouse brouhaha denigrated the colony and the colonists in the eyes of many. Among the more important bosses with whom plain whites negotiated were Floyd Sharp, Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, H.C. Baker, E.S. Dudley, W.A. Rooksbery, R.C. Limerick, Harry Hopkins, Arkansas Governor J. Marion Futrell, and construction supervisor Cone Murphy. Colonists' encounters were more frequent and more intense with some of these bosses than with others. An inverse ratio regulated exchange between the government men and dispossessed whites; the greater the luminance of the government men, the less was intimacy with the plain whites of Dyess. Four of the Dyess leaders are of particular interest.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 16 January 1936, 23 March 1939, 10 June 1977; *The Commercial Appeal*, 6 June 1999; RG 96, Archives II, letter to Harry L. Hopkins from Floyd Sharp, 20 May 1937, letter to Colonel Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp 20 May 1937, *The Colony Herald*, 1 May 1936; *Arkansas Democrat*, 16 March 1939; RG 96, Archives II, *National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form*, "Dyess Colony"; RG 96, Everett Dewey Henson, "Memories of the Dyess Colony"; Conklin, *Tomorrow a New World*, 137-38; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 31-26; Otto, *The Final Frontiers*, 103-105.



William Reynolds Dyess was born near Hazlehurst, Mississippi in 1894 and died in a plane crash on his way back to Arkansas from Washington a little after dark on 14 January 1936. The plane crash that killed all seventeen aboard, including Dyess and the Chief Accountant and Director of Finance and Reports, Robert H. McNair, Jr., was, at the time, the worst aviation tragedy in American history. The errand that sent Dyess to Washington and the proximate cause of his death involved arranging the financing for the new schools at the colony. The circumstances of his death, Dyess's magnetic and attractive physical presence, and the dynamic ease with which he managed his far-flung agency made Dyess a legendary character in the minds of most folks, even among those who later bitterly opposed the colony management. Floyd Sharp, Dyess's successor, paid homage to the almost mythic figure in explaining to Harry Hopkins just why the Colony needed a different legal identity than the one provided by general oversight of the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. "In March, 1936, with all the respect in the world to Mr. Dyess, we decided that circumstances made necessary the changing of some of his original plans." The primary change in original plans intended that the new legal entity of the colonization project escape the control of the Arkansas ERA and successor agencies. More precisely, Sharp intended the new corporate status to protect his own ability to dispense patronage.<sup>6</sup>

Dyess was a fine example of a New South agrarian. After graduating from Mississippi A & M, he entered military service and served as an orderly to General John 'Black Jack' Pershing in the Philippines. During the World War, Dyess was a cavalry

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<sup>6</sup> Letter to Hon. Harry Hopkins from Floyd Sharp, 20 May 1937, RG 96. *The Arkansas Gazette*, 16 January 1936.

captain and taught at a military school in Georgia. After the war, Dyess took to Arkansas the skills he had learned from his father, cotton planting, mule trading, and contracting – particularly levees, railroad beds, and gravel roads. He migrated to Arkansas and prospered in completion of contract work on the levees along the Mississippi and White Rivers. He bought thousands of acres of Delta wilderness and turned it into profitable cotton land. While building his financial status, Dyess also became a prominent figure in both local and state politics. He denied, however, just before his death, that he had any serious gubernatorial ambitions.<sup>7</sup>

Floyd Sharp was a lawyer from a modest background. He worked as a composer at the *Arkansas Gazette* – he maintained a life-long relationship with the Little Rock Typographer's Union – and after the war earned his baccalaureate and law degrees. After a brief private practice, discontinued due to ill health, Sharp joined the Arkansas Department of Labor as a statistician. His initial experience with relief work was with the state Emergency Relief Commission, a pre-New Deal agency funded by President Hoover's Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). Sharp's compassion for the dispossessed seems to be highly selective. In 1936, at the peak of wholesale tenant evictions in Northeast Arkansas, he refused to provide WPA benefits to members of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). Upon Dyess's death, Sharp replaced him as Director of the Arkansas WPA. His colleagues elected him President of Dyess Colony, Inc. at its formation and he retained that position until the FSA liquidated the project. J. (Junius) Marion Futrell was Governor of Arkansas at the creation of Dyess Colony. He

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<sup>7</sup> *The Colony Herald*, "Colonists Celebrate Second Anniversary Today," 22 May 1936; *The Commercial Appeal*, 5 November, 1936; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 30-33.

was a Dyess ally and remained a colony friend. After his defeat for re-election in 1936, Futrell became legal counsel for Dyess Colony, Inc. Some of the political rivalry of his past complicated the colony's existence.<sup>8</sup>

Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, also using Federal Funds under state direction, had already established a project near Houston, Texas. Because Westbrook had experience in establishing a government funded and managed rural relief project, and because of Westbrook's resume of experience, Henry Hopkins recruited him as an assistant in the FERA and its successor, the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Westbrook's relationship with Dyess Colony is interesting. While he worked to bring economic security and societal enhancement to plain folks, Westbrook also exploited his relationship with them.<sup>9</sup>

Lawrence Westbrook was not at all opposed to earning some money on the side and Floyd Sharp gave him an opportunity. Upon creation of Dyess Colony Inc., the ultimate control of the project passed from the Arkansas WPA to the corporation, the stock held in trust by the Secretary of Agriculture. Such re-organization took Westbrook from direct authority, but he retained his authority over matters that involved the WPA and rural relief and rehabilitation in general. The colonists at Dyess were still subject to

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<sup>8</sup>Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 95; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 30-32.

<sup>9</sup> Paul K. Conklin, *Tomorrow A New World: The New Deal Community Program*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959), 132-33, 135-37; Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 31-34, 280-83. Westbrook was an engineer, Texas state legislator, and a cotton baron. His Woodlake Project (1934) was physically very similar to the DSH projects. However, the Woodlake Project represented a much more aggressive or progressive effort. At Woodlake, the clients paid rent from agricultural surpluses and cultivated communal fields. The contemporary literature often mentions Westbrook and his "French-style" project. Westbrook was also largely responsible for the creation of the Pine Mountain Valley, Georgia and Cherry Lake Farm, Florida projects.

the same benefits and obligations as were any other of the Rural Relief clients. For example, notwithstanding the various cooperative arrangements imposed by Dyess Colony, all Rural Rehabilitation Clients, including the Colonists at Dyess, remained RRC clients until its absorption by the FSA and had to execute household budgets and yearly farm plans. Initially, County Extension Agents approved the plans; after March of 1935, this approval came from the County Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor. Sharp urged Lawrence Westbrook, Assistant Administrator of the WPA and close associate of Harry Hopkins, to resign his high office and move to Dyess to be its Resident Director. Westbrook declined but did offer Sharp an alternative. In early June 1936, Westbrook presented Sharp with a contract for his personal services. He told Sharp, according to Sharp, that he had cleared the proposition with Harry Hopkins who thought the arrangements outlined in the proposed contract would be of great advantage to the colony. Westbrook proposed that he assume the position of "Management Consultant." For a salary of \$5,000 per year, Westbrook proposed to provide the Colony with ninety days per year of continuous on-site service and management. Sharp, supposing that Hopkins approved the arrangement voted, as did Board Member H.C. Baker, to approve the contract. "Captain" R. C. Limerick, a member of the Board of Directors and also the Arkansas WPA Chief Engineer and Director of Operations, demurred. He thought, "for a salary of \$5,000 a year we can get a man with talent and energy to work full-time." Outvoted on the issue 2-1, Captain Limerick, "being the gentleman that he is . . . made the motion that we enter into the contract and it was seconded by Mr. Baker." H.C. Baker and R.C. Limerick refused to approve one particular provision in Westbrook's proposed contract. Westbrook's proposal provided a \$75.00 *per diem* reimbursement for

each day beyond ninety days expended on colony business. At the insistence of Baker and Limerick, the Board required advance approval for "extra days" compensation.<sup>10</sup>

Floyd Sharp granted E. S. Dudley a leave of absence from his Arkansas WPA position to move to Dyess as its Resident Director. On 9 June 1936, the Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc. entered into the "management counsel" agreement with Westbrook. One year later the Board, with the silent concurrence of Harry Hopkins, fired him. On March 20 1937, Sharp wrote to Harry Hopkins to explain the Board's decision to fire Westbrook. The five-page letter is deferential, explanatory, and emphatic. Sharp emphasized, emphatically, that he and the Board were under the impression that Hopkins knew of and approved the contract and the concept. Sharp complained that Westbrook had reduced his actual time at the Colony to "five or six days a month" and attempted to manage the colony's interest from his Washington office. Westbrook, Sharp said, had sent people to the colony and made changes without informing the Board. He was particularly upset about Westbrook's "cancellation of an expensive accounting system." The colony had re-established the same system at a considerable expense. Sharp's letter described the complexity of managing a good-sized town, a new school system, and all the related civic as well as social and economic considerations that required the attention of competent management. Since Westbrook had not fulfilled these obligations, the management gap had to be filled and toward that end, he informed Hopkins that the Board had agreed to compensate board members Sharp, Baker, and Limerick at the rate of \$100 per month for their services, but only when and as necessary. Sharp enclosed a series of Westbrook's expense reports and told Hopkins that he did not question the

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<sup>10</sup> All quotations in Letter to Harry Hopkins from Floyd Sharp, 20 May 1937, RG 69. This letter, one written on the same day to Westbrook, and other letters in RG 69.

expenses as such but did question if the Colony could justify expenses beyond the control of the Board of Directors. For Hopkins' information and approval, Sharp enclosed a letter to Westbrook declaring the contract breached and the reasons. Remaining deferential to the end, Sharp asked Hopkins to send the enclosed letter to Westbrook or return it to Sharp for delivery. He, Limerick, and Baker, remained committed to whatever Hopkins thought best, but would resign should he disallow cancellation of the contract.<sup>11</sup>

In the enclosed letter to Westbrook, Sharp was more specific, emphatic, and petulant with regard to the Board's dissatisfaction. Westbrook's attempt to manage by correspondence resulted in people arriving at the colony and claiming direct authority from Westbrook to institute changes without consultation with Resident Manager E. S. Dudley or with the Board. The Board understood that Westbrook would spend ninety days in residence at the colony, not just an occasional visit. Sharp complained that Westbrook did not see him on his last trip to Little Rock: "The evening you came through here, I waited in my office and called the hotel every thirty minutes until eleven o'clock, but, as you recall, you had gone to Hot Springs without checking out, and I did not get an opportunity to talk to you." The real problem with the contract was articulated in the third paragraph: "I must join with the opinion of the other two Board members that it is not fair to them for you to draw a good salary, under contract with the Colony, in excess of the amount they draw for the positions they hold with the Works Progress

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<sup>11</sup> Letter to Hon. Harry L. Hopkins from Floyd Sharp, 20 May 1937; letter to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, enclosed with letter to Hopkins, RG 96.

Administration. . .” Assuring Westbrook of the “warmest personal feelings” of the board, Sharp declared that the contract was, for reasons stated in the letter, breached.<sup>12</sup>

The lucrative compensation bothered Sharp from the beginning, but, as he told Hopkins, he thought that Hopkins had approved both the nature of the contract and the compensation. In terms of current dollars, Westbrook’s part time compensation of \$5,000 per year is roughly equivalent to \$72,727; his stipend of \$75.00 for all days over ninety is equivalent to \$1,090. By contrast, E.S. Dudley, Resident Manager earned \$325 per month, less than \$4,000 per year. It was, in the vernacular of the age, “good work if you could get it.”<sup>13</sup>

Oddly enough, the close relationship continued. Correspondence reveals that Westbrook, Sharp, and Dyess Colony continued some sort of working relationship. Within a year Westbrook’s name and position as Management Counsel reappeared on the Colony stationary. Sharp asked Westbrook for advice and help with the Arkansas Corporation Commission and Westbrook responded. Westbrook helped negotiate the sale of colony cotton and he devised a scheme to establish housing projects in West Memphis, and Hot Springs. Profits were to be divided between Dyess Colony, Inc and

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Calculations are from:

<http://www.projects.ex.ac.uk/RDavies/arian/current/howmuch.html> . Salary figures are taken from: “Administrative Personnel,” typewritten roll of monthly salaries in RG 69, Bureau of Agricultural Statistics, “Dyess Colony.” Sharps’ petulance is understandable. It appears that Westbrook made a similar agreement with the other two “independent” projects, Cherry Lake Farms, Florida and Pine Mountain Valley, Georgia. I discovered this arrangement, at least a hint of it by accident. See: Letter to Mr. Laurence Powell from Floyd Sharp, 22 July 1936, WPA Management File. If Westbrook’s compensation was near the level he bargained for with the Dyess Colony, then the extent of his larceny is truly breath taking and merits further examination. A look at Cherry Lake and Pine Mountain holds promise.

the particular politician so involved, a Judge in West Memphis and the Mayor in Hot Springs. The project would compensate Westbrook based on the profits accruing to Dyess Colony, Inc. Westbrook commented on the selection of families, helped to market the products of the colony's workshops, and continued to give solicited advice on various problems with the colony. It was a strange relationship. Sharp had cross words with Westbrook over an expense report related to the public housing project in April 1939 and yet Westbrook continued to consult and be a friend to the colony. Perhaps Sharp's outrage over the handsome compensation demanded by Westbrook would have been softened had he considered the rich compensation paid by the English Fine Spinners Association to AAA official Oscar G. Johnston. Beginning in 1927, the British manufacturers paid Johnston \$40,000 per year, an amount equivalent to \$464,248 in current dollars. Assuming that Delta sharecropper families earned \$500 (\$5,803 in 2006 dollars) per year during the 1920s, (the most liberal estimate I have yet found) Westbrook's part-time income – his wages for ninety days – was a relatively modest, by today's standards, 12.5 times the annual income of the typical sharecropper family. If one accepts the more orthodox estimate of Delta cropper family income, \$120 - \$1,912 in 2006 dollars, then Westbrook's part-time salary on a present-dollar annualized basis exceeded that of the cropper by a factor of thirty-eight. If Westbrook had managed a similar arrangement with other New Deal entities, he could have achieved an annual part-time income of \$290,908 in 2006 dollars, exclusive of his government salary. There is some evidence that he did. Of course, one of the barons of the cotton aristocracy, Oscar



G. Johnston, earned exclusive of his government salary, a little over 80 times the income of the most successful Delta cropper family.<sup>14</sup>

Whether money or compassion for the poor motivated people to get in the relief business, there were ample opportunities to exert influence and to build political strength in job patronage. Whether one “got on” or “got in” at Dyess could be a function of influence. Governor Carl E. Bailey had reason to suspect that Floyd Sharp and others were building political power by using the facilities of Dyess.

#### Dyess Colony – a brief political history

Three distinct crises illuminate the political history of Dyess Colony. Two of them – the second following the first almost immediately, in March 1939 – came as a function of Arkansas Governor Carl E. Bailey’s attempt to savage the political career of Floyd Sharp and to appropriate the awards of the patronage system. The third crisis was actuated by a revolt of some of the colonists. The first battle came as Governor Bailey – narrowly winning a consecutive term, miffed by the opposition of Floyd Sharp, et. al., and jealous of the power-building patronage inherent in the relief and rehabilitation programs – instigated a plan to have Dyess Colony investigated and then placed under the control of Arkansas officials. In the second effort to destroy the colony, the Governor revoked the colony’s charter.

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*; letter to Dear Floyd from Lawrence Westbrook, 20 April 1939 and a series of letters between Sharp and Floyd from 1936 through 1941, all in RG 96. Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton’s Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 39. The estimate of cropper income, the most liberal one I have found is from: Paul E Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, (Baton Rouge: The University of Louisiana Press, 1978), 10-11.  
<http://www.projects.ex.ac.uk/RDavies/arian/current/howmuch.html>

Plain whites were only tangentially involved in the first two crises; they were the substance of the third. The third crisis is a principal consideration of Chapter Five. Throughout Dyess colony history a coterie of bureaucrats managed, directed, supervised, and improved, or tried to improve, the dispossessed whites. As New Deal agencies succeeded one another in bewildering rapidity, Dyess Colony was exempt from some of the agency-transition problems. The Federal Emergency Relief Administration provided the funds that purchased the land and built the project by providing a grant to the State Emergency Relief Administration; Arkansas had no legal mechanism for operating a commercial enterprise. To provide a legal entity, the state of Arkansas (like most other states) established a Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (RRC) under Delaware laws; The Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation passed Federal funds to national and state relief and rehabilitation efforts and held title to Colonization Project No. 1. Upon the creation of the Resettlement Administration and the tragic death of William R. Dyess, Floyd Sharp, Dyess's successor, joined with H.C. Baker and R.C. Limmerick to incorporate Dyess Colony, Inc. with all three shares of stock pledged in trust to Harry Hopkins.

The corporate status of the project both simplified and complicated the experiment's existence. The Arkansas RRC provided funding, for not only construction and implementation of the colony, but also allowed for some flexibility for emergencies and the colonists' debt. Primarily, the fund was to ensure the colony's existence. The Board of Directors invested the sizable remaining balance of the FERA grant in government bonds; the Board of Directors was authorized to use the bonds as security for loans to the Colony. In emergencies, the Board was authorized to sell the bonds to fund

capital needs. Floyd Sharp, H.C. Baker, R. C. Limerick, and W. A. Rooksberry, constituted the board of the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. Thus, three of four board members of the RRC became the Board of Directors of Colonization Project #1; Floyd Sharp was President and H. C. Baker, and R.C. Limerick completed the directorship. W.A. Rooksberry, Director of the Unemployment Security Division of the state Labor Department, friend of Floyd Sharp, and political enemy of soon-to-be Governor Carl E. Bailey declined Board membership; he preferred, said Floyd Sharp in a letter to Harry Hopkins, to remain as an associate and advisor. The formation of Dyess Colony was not part of Dyess's original conception. There is no evidence that he ever conceived of the colonization project as anything other than part of an organized multi-unit re-orientation of small-scale agriculture. The incorporation of Dyess, apart from any umbrella U.S. agency authority, was the product of Floyd Sharp. Baker and Limerick both remained employed by the Arkansas Emergency Relief Agency and its successor the Works Progress Administration (WPA). Further legal maneuvering involved separate corporations for the operation of the various Dyess Colony attendant business and operations such as the colony store, gin, and the business interests of the colonists.

The Board of Directors decided to incorporate, under the laws of Arkansas, two cooperative associations, one to operate the colony's store and the other to gin and market the colonists' cotton – a consumer's and a producer's cooperative. By 1938, the Colony would have its own credit union, also cooperatively owned. The use of Arkansas

incorporation laws rather than those of Delaware was to leave the colony vulnerable to the vengeful actions of Governor Carl E. Bailey.<sup>15</sup>

Governor Carl E. Bailey was the leader of the Arkansas "statehouse crowd" that vied with Sharp's associates for control of patronage and power. Although it is not to his credit, the actions of Bailey as a state governor, were similar to those of many governors who were jealous of the power held by the WPA chiefs. Fearful of potential vulnerability should the colony remain a part of the Arkansas RRC, Sharp requested help from allies in Washington. Dr. H. M. Colvin, an attorney with the Works Progress Administration (WPA), helped Sharp around the thorny problem of how to keep continued control of the colony. Colvin assured Sharp that incorporating under Arkansas laws rather than those of Delaware was proper and provided the greatest legal protection for the continued governance of the colony by Sharp and his colleagues. The language seemed to require that the Board of Directors of a chartered cooperative be chosen from the ordinary membership. Colvin explained to Sharp that the Arkansas statutes provided loopholes that avoided any diminution of the control of the Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc. This attempt to evade democratic governance made the Colony vulnerable to attack from New Deal opponents and was ultimately responsible for the disintegration of Dyess Colony. This incident is also indicative of the advantages that Sharp held in the New

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<sup>15</sup> Dyess to Westbrook, 30 November 1934; "Minutes of Board of Directors Meeting, Dyess Colony, Incorporated," 17 February 1936; 25 March 1936; 17 March 1937; Memorandum to W.R. Dyess from Leon B. Catlett; "Certificate of Incorporation Colony Industries, Incorporated, all in University of Arkansas Special Collections, WPA Management File. Letter from Sharp to Hopkins, RG 96. See also, letter from Sharp to Westbrook, 11 December 1936.

Deal hierarchy. Although free of the control and direction of the WPA, Sharp still had access to WPA staff for advice and research.<sup>16</sup>

In April 1936, President Roosevelt created the Resettlement Administration and appointed Rexford G. (Guy) Tugwell as its Director. The Resettlement Administration assumed all the agrarian community efforts of the WPA, FERA, and DSH with three exceptions: Cherry Lake Farms at Madison, Florida; Pine Mountain Valley near Columbus, Georgia; and Dyess Colony. The corporate set up saved Dyess, possibly, from destruction at the hands of the cotton-baron dominated political machine under the administration of Carl E. Bailey. Bailey (inaugurated in January 1937) intended, according to reportage in the *Arkansas Gazette*, to destroy Floyd Sharp; he had already driven W.A. Rooksberry from his influential position, and to injure the colony's new attorney, former Governor J. Marion Futrell. Since the two cooperative associations were incorporated under Arkansas law, Bailey attempted to force a complete investigation into all manner of alleged improprieties at Dyess. He had authority to do so, he said, because the State of Arkansas might or might not have "an interest" in those corporations. The colony escaped Bailey's intended maledictions, oddly enough, through the efforts of some of Bailey's traditional supporters. The House Version of the Bill (HB 616) that authorized an investigation of the colony is instructive, especially its title and Section 3, produced below:

A bill for an Act to be entitled; "An act to determine the extent of the State of Arkansas' interest in establishment, management, and disposition of Dyess Colony."

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<sup>16</sup> H.M. Colvin to Floyd Sharp, 8 May 1936, RG 69 WPA Central Office Files.

Section 3. Whereas, it appears that the initial investments in what is now Dyess Colony were made with funds allotted to the state of Arkansas by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for general relief, said funds being endorsed or paid over to the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation; and provision is made in the charter of that corporation for title in Dyess Colony to pass to the state of Arkansas after certain conditions have been fulfilled; and Dyess Colony, Inc., has succeeded the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation in control of the colony, and it is imperative, if Arkansas has any immediate or prospective interest in the colony that said interest be determined and protected; now therefore this act is necessary for the preservation of the peace, health and safety of the public of Arkansas and it shall be in force and effective from and after its passage.<sup>17</sup>

There is nothing apparently sinister about Section 3. Reasonable and disinterested people could easily find value in ascertaining the ultimate disposition of Dyess property.

However, the purported reason for the bill, i.e., an investigation into whether or not the state of Arkansas had "an interest" in the colony was disingenuous at the least. The corporate structure of Dyess mandated that at the suspension of operations the title fell to the Secretary of Agriculture of the United States; the assets to be distributed via agreements between the Governor of Arkansas and the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture. The House passed the bill but upon presentation in the Senate, the bill met with open hostility by those who recognized the vicious political vendetta that it represented. The bill called for an investigation conducted, not by the Attorney General, but by the Corporation Commission, a board recently "refreshed" by Bailey appointees. Such blatant, malicious, and transparent political debauchery was too much even for the rough and tumble Arkansas politicians. Arkansas governors, since the Reconstruction Constitution (from 1874 and until 1984), served terms of two years and could serve successive terms. The bi-annual election required that contestants for political power

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<sup>17</sup> Copy of Arkansas House Bill 616, RG 69, WPA Central Office Records.

(not always represented in holding office) keep close tabs and short accounts with their political allies.<sup>18</sup>

At its creation Dyess Colony filed papers with the State Corporation Commission claiming non-profit status. The cooperatives were simply an entity for managing and directing cooperative economic activities for individual cooperative members. All profits, dividends, and surpluses were distributed among the members. Angered by Sharp's support of his gubernatorial opponent, Bailey had his functionaries introduce a bill that called for an investigation of the Dyess Colony by the State Corporation Commission.<sup>19</sup>

By 7 March 1939, Floyd Sharp was confident that nothing would come of Bailey's assault. He informed Lawrence Westbrook, "It seems that my friends conceived the idea of putting an amendment on the Bill transferring the question . . . to the Office of the Attorney General, on the theory that it was a legal question and not one for the Corporation Commission to investigate with auditors." After opposing the amendment, the administration changed its view and urged its adoption in order to have a vote on the bill before adjournment. Even though the general consensus held that the addition of the amendment was the death-knell of Bailey's attempt to disgrace Sharp, Bailey faced one final frustration in his attempt. On the last day of the legislative session, State Senator Ellis Fagan, a long-time friend of Governor Bailey, began a filibuster. Fagan's loyalty to the Governor, notwithstanding, he allowed only three brief interruptions while he slowly and deliberately read the introductory remarks from the Colony's last audit. Ellis Fagan,

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<sup>18</sup> *Arkansas Democrat*, 6- 9 March 1939; *Arkansas Gazette*, 6- 9 March 1939.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

a loyal Bailey supporter and “statehouse crowd” stalwart proved by his actions that he was capable of rising above petty Arkansas political considerations. The Arkansas Legislative Session ended at noon on 9 March 1939; the Colony had been spared.<sup>20</sup>

Floyd Sharp wrote to Lawrence Westbrook in words that are easily interpreted as “crocodile tears” or simply a smirk. He reported to Westbrook on 9 March:

I feel badly about it for several reasons. First, Senator Fagan, who led the floor fight has been a close personal friend of Governor Bailey for years. . .

I thought it wise, in self-defense, to show a little strength and defeat this measure, and was successful, but it will only serve to intensify their feelings against me.<sup>21</sup>

The next day Governor Bailey dropped the other shoe. The State Corporation Commission revoked the Dyess Charter. Bailey had carefully replaced members of the commission with his own allies and had them revoke the charter claiming the Dyess Colony had failed to file a report for three years and had not paid the \$11.00 annual fee required of Arkansas Corporations. The Dyess Colony Board of Directors promptly published two letters from the Arkansas Corporation Commission to the Colony informing that the Colony was indeed classified as a non-profit and therefore, exempt from taxes and reports. The letters, dated 9 February and 21 February, addressed to J.M. Futrell and Dyess Colony, respectively, were followed by a strange and in retrospect downright goofy epistle from W.S. Miller, of the commission. He said that since they had informed the Colony and its attorney in February that the colony qualified as a non-profit, that they had thought about it some more and decided that the Colony was not

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* *Arkansas Gazette*, 10 March 1939.

<sup>21</sup> Letter to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, RG 96.



exempt. The letter informing of the revised status dated 10 March 1939, arrived a full ten days too late for Dyess Colony to comply with the reconsidered regulations. Miller's last sentence in the letter explained why he had bothered to write, "I feel you are entitled to know the position taken by the commission." In the meantime, Ellis Fagan received praise for his political integrity and it did not cost the Governor at all.<sup>22</sup>

Sharp, in Donald Holley's description, now subdued and depressed, assembled advisors and with Limerick and Baker formed Dyess Rural Rehabilitation Corporation. In turn, the Board of Directors of Dyess Colony Incorporated sold the property to Dyess Rural Rehabilitation Corporation.<sup>23</sup> The disposition of the Colony was clearly articulated; at the end of operations, mandated by the revocation of the Charter to conclude within three years, the assets would devolve to the Secretary of Agriculture of the United States. Floyd Sharp remained President of Dyess Rural Rehabilitation Corporation until its functions were subsumed into the Farm Security Administration (FSA) in 1944. "In 1951 the Farmers Home Association (FHA) simply closed its files on the Dyess Colony."<sup>24</sup>

#### Blanks and Bureaucracy at Dyess

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<sup>22</sup> "Minutes" 22 March 1939; W.S. Miller, Secretary Tax Division, Arkansas Corporation Commission to Dyess Colony, Inc., 9 February 1939; W.S. Miller to J. M. Futrell, 21 February 1939; and W.S. Miller to J.M. Futrell, Legal Advisor, 10 March 1939, all in University of Arkansas Special Collections, WPA Management File. Letter from Sharp to Colonel F. C. Harrington, Works Progress Administration, 17 March 1939; telegram from the *Arkansas Democrat* to Washington, D. C. reporter, 16 March 1939; all in RG 96.

<sup>23</sup> "Minutes: Meeting of Board of Directors, of Dyess Colony" 22 March 1939; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 222.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 239. For a full administrative history, especially of the last days of Dyess Colony, see Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 222-239.

The Great Depression may have been the worst of times, but not as bad for some as for others. Cotton barons, the politically connected, and government bureaucrats fared better than most. From every rattle of the New Deal cup there poured letters designating a new level of federal bureaucracy. Each alphabet agency required its own directors, administrators, assistants, and a horde of clerical personnel, caseworkers, home demonstrators, inspectors, and accountants. Some plain whites of the Delta meekly submitted to the status of wage-labor relief and the psychological and physical malaise into which it cast them. A phalanx of self-consciously competent and solemnly serious bureaucrats inspected their houses, rummaged through personal possessions, asked pointed and embarrassing questions about spending and personal habits; they wanted to know: how “enthusiastic” they were in their religion, how much they drank, and what diseases and disabilities were present. The “government men” directed, or tried to, their lives. Dyess Colony and government men introduced plain whites to one of the most irritating attributes of modernity; they produced “blanks.” Government men required blanks, or forms, for the commodities program, a blank for Rural Relief registration, a blank for WPA eligibility, another one for certification, a blank for, it seemed, about everything one touched in the New Deal.<sup>25</sup>

In the New Deal, blanks represented power and assumed an aura of authority equal to at least that of the Minor Prophets. It seemed to the dispossessed that blanks were the key to actuating the programs of the New Deal, and plain white petitioners had

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<sup>25</sup>“Blank” was the generic term most used for application forms. See: James Truly to W. R. Dyess, no date, WPA File. “Pertinent Agricultural Data,” typewritten draft of form used in interviewing potential clients, RG 96. The reference to “government men” and “the girl in the office” are ubiquitous in the archives. For example, see: Levi Skyron to W.R. Dyess, 14 October 1934.

great difficulty locating them. Representative of this appreciation of the near miracle-working power of the blank is the supposition of T.H. Davis of Prattsville, Arkansas. Davis asked W.R. Dyess when the application blanks would be distributed for sale. The reverence that plain whites gave to blanks was a subset of the value that they gave to the printed and official word. One of the most obvious markers of success was the inclusion of one's name on the letterhead.<sup>26</sup>

Official letterhead clothed the bearer with authority not necessarily justified by the verbiage, as illustrated by Mrs. Emery Hall of Lake City, Arkansas. Mrs. Hall was in a fix. She had told her landlord, who was insisting that she vacate the property, about Colonization Project No. 1, and showed him a letter on official stationery from W.R. Dyess. Dyess's letter was a standard generic response to queries about becoming a colonist. The form letter said, among other things, that the first colonists would arrive in October; Mrs. Hall, accordingly, had made plans to move. She showed her letter to her landlord who agreed, based on the power of the official printed word and Mrs. Hall's interpretation of it, to allow her to stay on her place until October. Mrs. Hall was desperate by 6 October. She had not enrolled her children in the local school because she could not afford to buy two sets of books – one for the local school and another for use in the colony's schools. She had not heard from Dyess, was she going to get one of the farms? Her landlord wanted her to move. What was she to do? She wanted help and advice; she asked the man whose name was emblazoned on the official script.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Letter to W.R. Dyess from T.H. Davis, 24 September 1935, WPA Administration File.

<sup>27</sup> Letter to W.R. Dyess from Mrs. Emery Hall, 6 October 1934, *Ibid.* Mrs. Hall's effort to gain entrance to the Colony continued. See Chapter Five.

Blanks, or the lack of them, had already driven both government men and their clients to distraction. In the 1931 England, Arkansas “food riot” local Red Cross officials ran out of blanks and, according to administrative orthodoxy, had no choice but to halt distribution of emergency subsistence vouchers – blanks in the vernacular of plain folks. The plain whites of England, Arkansas did not yet appreciate the sacrosanct nature of the blank; they failed to see how the lack of a form was credible reason for their children to go hungry again. The merchants of England, rather than see their stock of goods appropriated by the crowd prevailed upon the Red Cross locals to accept receipts, in lieu of vouchers. In the summer of 1933, with three weeks left in the cotton acreage reduction sign-up period, a shortage of blanks brought howls from the County Extension Agents frantically trying to implement the program. T. Roy Reid, director of the Arkansas Extension Service wired Cully Cobb, head of the Cotton Section of the AAA and former director of the Mississippi Extension Service: “Need contract blanks immediately. Campaign being greatly retarded by shortage of blanks. Please rush supply.” Stymied because of the lack of the semi-sacred script, Reid, a few days later, reported on the sluggish progress, “committeemen could finish this week if blanks available.” Finally, someone from this large group of college educated government men courageously broke the bounds of orthodoxy and suggested that the county agents make their own blanks, using any form of suitable paper. They could make the plow-up pledges legal by transferring them to the proper blanks (forms) later. It is difficult for contemporaries to understand the power of perceived “official words.” Plain whites felt reverence and stood in awe of the power of the printed word. <sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Keith J. Volanto, “The AAA Cotton Plow-up Campaign in Arkansas,” *The Arkansas*

Mississippi County, Dyess's home county, was an ideal place to hatch Colonization Project No. 1. Later, Arkansas investigators would quiz William Dyess about the happy circumstances of its physical location in Dyess's home county. Dyess avoided sanction not only because it appears there was no collusion involved but also because it would be hard to imagine a better deal on Delta land. How much land Dyess bought, from whom, and how much he paid for it became grounds of contention. Dyess, using funds from the original FERA grant, negotiated the purchase at \$2.50 per acre. The public perception that Dyess had bought the land for \$2.50 an acre obscured the truth. Before Dyess could deliver the property to the Arkansas Emergency Relief Administration, there was a matter of accumulated levee taxes, drainage district fees, survey costs, and myriad incidentals. Mirroring the complaints of the Tupelo and McComb Division of Substance Housing projects, and citing the \$2.50 land price, Dyess colonists viewed the final purchase-price as an outrage. Further misunderstandings arose because of the reportage of the land sale. The *Memphis Commercial Appeal* reported that Dyess purchased about 20,000 acres of land; *The Southwest Times Record* reported that the purchase included 10,000 acres; the *Colony Herald* reported 16,000 acres, and a history of the colony says Dyess bought 16,000 acres from "drainage district no.9 at an average price of \$8.50 an acre in back taxes."<sup>29</sup> Some references cite 17,000 acres, others about 17,000, and still others quote 17,500 acres. The foremost historian of the New Deal agricultural efforts in the lower Mississippi Valley, Donald Holley, has untangled

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*Historical Quarterly*, 4, (4), (Winter, 2000): 389-406; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 3-5; 17-24.

<sup>29</sup> Henson, "Memories of the Dyess Colony," RG 96. Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 35.

the web. Dyess originally planned to purchase 20,000 acres belonging to Lee Wilson Company, Creamery Package Company, and drainage district Number 9. He was not able to negotiate that purchase. Finally, Dyess purchased 15,144 acres of tax-forfeited cut over and swamp land. The final cost, not price, of the improved land was \$136,994.49, \$9.05 per acre. Perception is often far more important than reality; the perceptions about price and costs incited dramatic Dyess revolts.<sup>30</sup>

In addition to the confusion over the size of the purchase, some thought that W.R. Dyess had acquired the property in order to benefit his personal associates. Responding to questions about the project by Senator Thomas P. Gore of Oklahoma in debate over the proposed Bankhead Bill in the U.S. Senate, Dyess wrote, not to the Oklahoma solon, but to the Arkansas boss, Senator Joe T. Robinson. He hastened to assure Robinson that the land purchase was a disinterested business transaction.

When the titles, passed on by our Legal Department in amount of approximately 16,000 acres, were presented to us for payment, the Federal Court, through its receiver, gave us a title to this property. The Drainage Commissioners of both Districts No. 9 and Nos. 3 to 9 gave us title to this property, and *at no time has any part of this property been purchased by us from any individual whatever.*<sup>31</sup> (Italic emphasis added)

Dyess's letter to Robinson also anticipated and answered another implied criticism. The land had been offered for sale at \$5.00 per acre, yet Dyess acquired it for half that amount. Dyess explained thus:

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<sup>30</sup> Hemen, "Detailed Report the Dyess Rural Industrial Community," RG 96.; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 35; Henson, "Memories of the Dyess Colony," RG 96; *Southwest Times Record*, 20 May 1934; *The Mississippi County Sentinel*, 22 May 1934; *Arkansas Gazette*, 9 January 1939; "National Register of Historical Places Inventory – Nomination Form," *Dyess Colony*, University of Arkansas Special Collections.

<sup>31</sup> W.R. Dyess to Joe T. Robinson, 30 April 1935, RG 96.

While it is true that the Commissioners and the Receiver did have to do some trading to deliver us this property tax free, this Administration dealt with no people in this purchase except the Federal Receiver and the Commissioners of those districts.<sup>32</sup>

There were other reasons that recommended Mississippi County. In the first place, Mississippi County, according to the 1930 Census, was the most productive (pounds of lint per acre) cotton county in the entire nation; its 899 square miles of territory also made it the largest county in Arkansas. The particular tract, bisected by the Tyronza River – eight miles from its nearest point to the Mississippi River, on which the Colony rested, was mostly cutover stump land and the few virgin areas contained gigantic hardwoods. The top soil, measured in various sections of the tract, ranged from forty to over 100 feet deep. The citizens of Mississippi County were accustomed to cultivating the Delta buckshot black land, were acclimated to the environment, familiar with the vagaries of Delta farming, and numerous. The total population grew from 47,320 in 1920 to 69,289 in 1930 – a 46% increase. In 1930, only 2% of its 69,289 residents worked in industry. Mississippi County was one of those desperation destinations for plain whites fleeing the sterile and drought-baked lands of the South. In the ten year period from 1920-1930, the white population of Mississippi County grew from just under 16,000 to 43,144 – an increase of over 170%. The black population actually fell by a little over 5,000 during those years. If ever there was an ideal place and people among whom to conduct a bold relief and rehabilitation agrarian experiment, it was Mississippi County, Arkansas. Thousands of “pure anglo-saxon (*sic*) rural whites and just plain American negroes” (said FERA inspectors) lived near acres and acres of black land, knew the

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

peculiarities of living in the Delta, and were surprised to find that there was no place for them at Dyess. The Mississippi County folks confronted, perhaps, the first of the puzzling ways of government men. The project was not for Delta folks, but for the entire state of Arkansas. There were many other instances of those puzzling ways.<sup>33</sup>

### Building Dyess from scratch

The New Deal confronted Americans with bureaucracy. Small town and rural America were accustomed to a mild form of line-standing regimentation. Voting, ginning, and various items of civic and personal business required a certain stylized behavior. One waited in line, dressed appropriately, and conducted one's business with a person. Plain whites had little interaction with the governmental bureaucracy; they had little reason to do so. Most every item of business, private or governmental, was dispatched directly and with a name, a face, and in most cases, a reputation. When plain whites received a letter, they took it seriously. When they had a question, they attempted to do what they always did – ask the man in charge. To modern eyes, the responses and queries of plain folks in the 1930s appear simple and naïve. Some, no doubt, were. However, that which we dismiss as simple, romantic, or just naiveté is just as likely a function of personal responsibility and integrity. In the late summer and fall of 1935, President Roosevelt wrote clergymen across the United States asking them for an evaluation of progress. Thousands of them gave the President the benefit of their views. Revered Henry Felgar Brooks, Pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church, South of Tupelo, Mississippi did not feel competent to give the President advice. He could only

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<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.* "Background History, Construction Plan and Progress, FSA and Successor Agencies, Project Records, 1935-1949, AK 80, Box 181, RG 96, hereinafter "Construction Plan and Progress."



report on the comments and attitudes of his parishioners. His only criticism concerned the requirement that only those who had been on relief were able to obtain work relief.

He reminded the President:

The "Works Program" meets a general need, but there is a pretty general criticism on it that it applies only for those have been on relief rolls. There are hundreds and thousands of people who have not asked the government for one penny of help. Some of them have nothing scarcely to live upon. Others have but little, but out of their self-respect and regard for the government of our nation, they have not asked for anything. These are in need. . . I personally feel that they ought to be included in the "Works Program."

Perhaps you might remember me if I should recall to your memory that I chanced to be the minister who gave the Invocation in the big open field where you addressed masses on the occasion of your visit to our city . . .<sup>34</sup>

Some of the President's correspondent Ministers really thought that the President would read and respond. Plain whites wrote letters. Some of them are pitiful, some are eloquent, some are manipulative, some are honest, and all of them – even the ones meant to deceive – are revealing.<sup>35</sup>

Visions of ownership of a farm at Dyess came with the announcement of the project; however, the first promise of economic relief for the dispossessed of Mississippi County was in the building of it. The scale of the task is greatly underappreciated. The depression witnessed truly spectacular feats of construction. The Boulder (Hoover) Dam, the dams and transmission lines of the Tennessee Valley Authority, and even the privately constructed depression-era Chrysler and Empire State Buildings tend to

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<sup>34</sup> Letter to Hon. Franklin D. Roosevelt from Henry Felgar Brooks, 27 September 1935, President's Personal File (Clergy Letters) FDR Library, Hyde Park, NY.

<sup>35</sup> For examples of such letters, see University of Arkansas Special Collections, "Works Progress Administration File and President's Personal File (PPF), "Clergy Letters, FDR Library.

overshadow the impressive feats of human organization and productivity in the Arkansas Delta. During the summer and fall of 1934 and into the fall of 1935, Construction Superintendent Cone Murphy managed the work of as many as 1,500 men at a time in building an agricultural community from rugged swamps and a modern town complete with necessary and optional amenities.<sup>36</sup>

Starting in the northeast corner of the property, Cone put crews of unskilled men to work cutting trees, digging drainage ditches, building bridges and constructing roads. Six gasoline operated sawmills – two of them portable – and one steam sawmill rendered the hardwoods into building materials for the colony or for sale. Crews began laying out the property into twenty-acre plots, and clearing a two-acre house site for each farm. Officials soon realized, even before any colonists moved in, that the regimentation of twenty acres per family was not a workable notion. To accommodate different sized families, Dyess provided standardized homes in three versions, and later after much discussion and complaint, the colony relaxed its rules and allowed the division of property into plots of 20, 30, and 40 acres. There was no direct correlation between house and farm size. The labor force of a family determined the acreage; the aggregate number determined the bedrooms. The size of the farm depended, just as it had under the sharecropping system, on the family's labor force. A couple with a teen-aged son could live decently in one of the three room houses, yet they had labor sufficient for the efficient cultivation of more than twenty acres. On the other hand, a young family with four small children could apply only one person to cultivation, yet justify a four or five room house.

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<sup>36</sup> "Construction Plan and Progress", RG 96. Baker, *Traveling Recovery Road*, 153-55; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 35-38; Otto, *The Final Frontiers*, 103-105.

Indeed, the farm size envisioned for the colonists at Dyess is emblematic of the clash of notions relative to the role of agriculture in the social and economic fabric of the country. Farm sizes at Dyess Colony reflect a misapplication of the work of Howard Odom, Arthur Raper, T. J. Woofter, and others. Erosion, thin soil, and the boll weevil plagued Raper's Georgia counties. The land at Dyess flooded – it did not erode; the topsoil at Dyess was from forty to over 100 feet deep – its phosphorus content could support cotton crops for ninety years without enrichment. The boll weevil, like the Death Angel that passed over the obedient Children of Israel, barely disturbed the cotton culture or the economy in the Delta; it devastated the “cotton-South.”<sup>37</sup>

The logging crews were unskilled men taken from the rolls of the Mississippi County office of the National Reemployment Service; the skilled workers came, primarily, from the rolls of the Arkansas State office. Using some of the 65,000 board feet of lumber produced daily by the colony sawmills, Murphy also built facilities for the workers. Until the camp was established, workers arrived every day by truck from Osceola. Assertions that the project was located near any established community were generous. According to the Project Records, the “nearest urban center” was Lepanto, seven miles west; Tyrone and Basset, each about twelve miles away, Wilson was approximately ten miles. The nearest significant town, Osceola, was twenty miles away; Blytheville was thirty and Memphis lay on the east bank of the Mississippi seventy-five miles to the east while the Arkansas WPA and ERA managers resided in Little Rock, 169 miles to the northwest. Until Murphy's crews built the road, one could not get to Dyess from anywhere. By mid June, crews had completed a temporary headquarters building,

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<sup>37</sup> “Construction Plans and Progress RG 96.

barracks for the workers, and a kitchen that served three mess halls. Two of the dining facilities served white laborers, the other one fed black workers. The workers lived in one of four bunkhouses, equipped with an iron cot, cotton mattress, blanket and clean sheets. Laborers paid seventy-five cents a day for board and lodging, deducted from paychecks. The total cost of feeding and lodging crews during the construction period amounted to \$26, 820.66, of which \$16, 274.14 was reimbursed via payroll deductions.<sup>38</sup>

The construction pace picked up apace with the growing work force. In less than eighteen months Murphy's crews built 500 farm cottages, about 65 miles of graded and graveled main roads (26 feet wide), an almost equal number of secondary roads (22 feet wide), 25 main bridges, 35 small ones, about 35 miles of drainage ditches, barns, chicken coops, and all of the structures, including the "community center" residences for the government men in the town. The roar from two caterpillar diesel tractors, three draglines, two ditch dredges, one pile driver, seven sawmills, concrete mixer, planning mill, and six International Harvester trucks mingled with the slap of the wheels and tires of sixteen eight-wheeled log wagons, thirty-two lumber wagons, three road wagons, two wheel-barrows, and a horde of mules. (The mule lot built near the community center could accommodate 300.) According to State Auditor, Robert H. McNair, the above listed equipment, excluding the mules but including a "Plymouth Coach Automobile" cost \$94,358.49. For an indication of the size of this project in contemporary terms,

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*; W.R. Dyess to H.S. Steed, 25 August 1934 and Cone Murphy to W.W. Campbell, 3 August 1934, all in WPA File; Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 332-35.

consider. Calculated based on the consumer price index (CPI), the cost of this equipment today would be a little over \$142 million. The Plymouth cost the colony \$675.50.<sup>39</sup>

Project Director Cone Murphy carried out the construction of Dyess with great celerity and efficiency. Murphy's crews were so accomplished that they completed the farm cottages well before the social workers identified and transported the colonists to their new homes. Using the plans drawn by Dyess's associate, Architect Howard Eichenbaum, Murphy assembled a crew of twenty-five carpenters and closely supervised them as they completed a model of each basic design. Then Murphy assigned each of the carpenters his own crew, gave each crew a set of Eichenbaum's plans, and sent them out to build three, four, and five room farm cottages, even though the weather was "abnormally" hot and both men and work animals were handicapped. There were several cases of heat prostration and the workers "... were not pushed to their full capacity."<sup>40</sup> By 1 August 1934, four colony residences were completed. The forty town-center residences were built in close vicinity to the Community Building and were no different in construction or design from the farm cottages. The residences were designed for the associated administrators, teachers, and operators of the various commercial enterprises. Laborers used the first house as sleeping quarters; planners used it to determine the cost of furnishing a house. The government men decided that, "Three bedrooms, a living room, and a kitchen were provided for in a very satisfactory manner at a cost of \$195."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> "Construction Plans and Progress" RG 96. The present value calculations are taken from <http://measuringworth.com/calculators/ppowerus/result.php>, accessed 19 December, 2007.

<sup>40</sup> "Plans and Progress" RG 96.

<sup>41</sup> *Traveling Recovery Road*, 156-57; "Plans and Progress," RG 96,

Murphy listed the expectations he imposed on his crews. His expectations were identical to the supervising architect's estimate of actual time schedules. According to Eichenbaum:

Each crew of seven men can lay three foundations per day.  
 A ten – man crew can construct the frame for a five-room house in 16 hours.  
 Four men can shingle a house in 6 hours.  
 Eight men can place the siding in 16 hours.  
 Eight men can complete the ceiling and floors in 16 hours.  
 Three men can install the hardware, doors, and windows in 16 hours.  
 Five carpenters and two laborers can complete the barns in 6 hours.  
 Six men can prime a house prior to painting in 5 hours.  
 Six painters can paint the house in 6 hours.<sup>42</sup>

After the initial routines were established, the construction crews proceeded much more rapidly than did those responsible for identifying and selecting potential colonists. Changes in philosophy over the acreage allowed caused some retardation of the building schedule, but no potential colonists had to wait for a home upon arrival at Dyess. Murphy's crews built it faster than the FERA or the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (RRC) or the Resettlement Administration (RA) could fill it. By 31 December, workers had completed 146 farm cottages and twenty residences; two cottages and four residences were under construction; and wired forty-three buildings for electricity. With much the same reasoning that had prompted the DSH to build the McComb Homesteads with wiring but no electrical power, both electrical wiring and indoor plumbing appliances were included in the construction.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

Word got out and plain whites responded, quickly. By May of 1934, letters inundated Dyess's office asking for information, asserting intention to take up the government's offer, inquiring as to what type or class of people would be accepted, or expressing frustration with the lack of information. Thousands of Mississippi County dispossessed whites and blacks were near destitution. Some had lost their farms due to physical, climatic, or economic forces; others lost their commercial positions because of the drastic fall in economic activity. They longed to join the throng and the cacophony emanating from the sylvestrian swamps of Mississippi County. Colonization Project No. 1 offered hope to the dispossessed in two ways. Some would find work, perhaps, as a fulltime employee. The structures built to house the economic and community activities of the colony – the thirty-two town residences built to house the workers and managers of those activities – meant that there would be some real jobs available at the colony. The distressed dispossessed looked for jobs. They were, in the vernacular of the time, trying to “get on” at Dyess. The other avenue of hope for plain whites lay in the possibility of obtaining a farm and a chance to become a personification of the Jeffersonian dream. Plain whites made application to the project in order to become an independent yeoman farmer. The second avenue of hope required that one “get in” at the colony; the first required that one “get on.”<sup>44</sup>

#### “Getting on” at Dyess

Plain whites wanted jobs so they wrote. They wrote letters; they had other people write letters; they referenced common acquaintances, and they tried to use pity, outrage,

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<sup>44</sup> See: WPA Management File Box 8; RG 96.

or past association to “get on” at Dyess. Local folks were gratified to see that most of the 1,500 construction era workers were local men and that all of them were Arkansans. However, notwithstanding the procedure of hiring men from the county and state Reemployment Service offices, there was an area of discretion in selecting workmen. Certain supervisors, particularly those whose tasks were of a skilled nature, could “requisition” workers by name.<sup>45</sup> This provision and the use of it make for interesting reading and subtle commentary. The construction phase of the project gathered men wholesale from the local office; it seemed that available jobs were assigned immediately. If one depended on the mail to facilitate a hunt for employment, the Dyess construction jobs would be taken before the missive arrived. However, Dyess was a new town, and needed all sorts of people representing a range of experiences and skills. The population growth was a bit slower than the planners expected but by the time that F. J. Hemmen visited Dyess to ascertain business prospects for his Memphis Sears and Roebuck Store, Dyess was a brand new and thriving, it seemed, town of about 3,000 people. There had to be jobs. Some people wanted construction jobs – some construction or remodeling continued throughout the life of Dyess Colony – some wanted a position, and some just wanted a life.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> The ability to select specific workmen under the regulations is articulated in: letter to Jay J. Johnson from W.R. Dyess, 15 October 1935. “. . . and should Mr. Murphy desire your services, he could ask especially for your assignment, WPA Admin File, Box 8.

<sup>46</sup> Letter to W.R. O'Donnell from Floyd Sharp, 10 March 1936, WPA Management File, “We are terminating for this year the construction program, having completed five hundred houses and the community center. We expect to construct three school buildings a little later on under a W.P.A. project which of course will have to be relief labor and pay security wage.” Sharp's letter was in response to O'Donnell's query about full-time employment as staff carpenter. Hemen, “Detailed Report the Dyess Rural Industrial Community.”; W.R. Dyess to C. M. Laird, 7 November 1934, WPA Administration File.



The rules concerning employment with the various New Deal agencies were neither simple nor elegant but they did exist. In order to gain employment, applicants had to satisfy the regulations; many suspected that they also must satisfy the "code." How did one "get on" at Dyess; what was the combination to the code? W. R. Dyess clearly translated the regulations to an applicant who desired employment at the colony as a carpenter:

It will be necessary for you to register with the Reemployment Officer in your County as Carpenter. You should have an investigation made by the Relief Administration as to your needs, at which time have your monthly budgetary requirements set by that agency, which will in turn certify you to the Reemployment office for employment in connection the Work Division in that County.

Persons assigned to work in the colonization project out of Mississippi County must be done through the National Reemployment Service, whose State Office is in Little Rock.<sup>47</sup>

Dyess's simplified articulation of the regulations made the laws more intelligible, but said nothing about other, if any, more-informal requirements. Some applicants concluded by virtue of perspicacity, intuition, or suspicion that one had to possess influence, "pull" in the vernacular of the day, to secure a position. Mr. J.B. Reynolds

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Most of the correspondence is found in the following: RG 69, Bureau of Agricultural Economics; RG 96, Project Files; FDR Library, Clergy Letter File, the Gardner Pat Jackson Papers, Harry Hopkins Papers; WPA Administration File; Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers; Duke University, Special Collections, Papers of the Socialist Party of America.

<sup>47</sup>Letter to H.S. Steed from W.R. Dyess, WPA Administration File. These procedures applied only to skilled labor. W.A. Rooksberry, a Colony ally and advisor, was the head of the Arkansas office of the National Reemployment Service.

approached that issue directly in his letter of complaint and application, "Does it require political pull to get help from the government?" he asked.<sup>48</sup>

L. C. Hoover did not waste time with the niceties. He wrote Governor Futrell, in a refreshingly collegial style, and his first sentence instructed the Governor to "Please take up with Mr. Dyess and get me a job. I kneed (*sic*) work bad." He "would be very glad to get the job as 'Commissary Manger' at the Dyess Colony in Mississippi County." Hoover briefly reminded the Governor of his expertise and said that he would take "some other good job" if the "Commissary Manger" job was taken. He made sure that Governor understood that he fully understood the way one played the game. "Mr. Dyess has lots of jobs" he told the Governor, ". . . and if you bear down on him he will give me any thing you ask him for. You no (*sic*) I have a family and have a girl in St. Luke's Hospital, St. Louis, making a nurse we have to keep her up - & wasn't for what work my son gets we would not get by." Hoover urged Governor Futrell to "go get close behind Mr. Dyess and make him come across . . ." It appears that Mr. Hoover did not have as much "pull" with the Governor as he thought. The Governor "got close behind" Dyess by sending him Hoover's letter. He wrote to W. R. Dyess, "I am inclosing a letter from Mr. L. C. Hoover. He tells you of his experience, and you see his handwriting. I guess he is in need." There is no record of Hoover's employment at Dyess Colony.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> J. B. Reynolds to W.R. Dyess, undated hand-written note on a letter to Reynolds from Charles B. Tremor, Civil Works Administration, 21 July 1934, WPA Administration File.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to My Dear Governor Futrell from L.C. Hoover, 29 August 1934; letter to W. R. Dyess from J.M. Futrell 20 September 1938, both in WPA Administration File, Box 8. The term "Dyess Colony" was widely used even before the official name change upon Dyess's death.

More sophisticated was the campaign conducted by Irvin Lay of Jerome, Arkansas. Lay gathered his forces and had twelve (intentional symbolism?) of his neighbors and fellow constituents petition Senator Joe T. Robinson. "We, the undersigned voters and citizens of Arkansas respectfully request your personal *aggressive* act in behalf of Mr. Irvin Lay of Jerome, Arkansas." (Italic emphasis added) "This gentleman, well-known to us has filed his application with President Floyd Sharp and with Hudson Wren concerning placement in Dyess Colony." Senator Robinson forwarded the request/petition to Floyd Sharp with the suggestion that: "If he is found qualified for the work he desires and there is a vacancy available, I should like to see him given recognition." Floyd Sharp's response to Senator Robinson was tantamount to a guarantee:

Mr. Lay is well recommended as an Agriculturist and we have his application on file for consideration at the first opening in the Colony where his services can be used. Of course, like all other agencies at this time, the Colony is over-staffed, but apparently Mr. Lay, from his recommendations, is the type of man that we hope to be able to assist in its development.<sup>50</sup>

Senator Hattie Caraway also wanted to recommend an agriculturist for the Colony. "Howard B. Arnold . . . states that he is well qualified for the place. I do not know his qualifications but presume you do. I will appreciate your looking into the case." Mr. Arnold had written to Dyess that his position with the National Industrial Recovery Administration (salary \$2,600) "was discontinued." He was, said Mr. Arnold, a "graduate Agriculturist from a recognized agricultural college" W.R. Dyess's response

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<sup>50</sup> Letter to The Honorable Joe T. Robinson from M.A. Bates, James R. Riley, W. C. Deal, et. al, n.d.; letter to Floyd Sharp, State Director Works Progress Administration, From Joe T. Robinson 13 July 1936; Letter to Hon. Joe T. Robinson, 18 July 1936, all *Ibid.*

to Senator Caraway seems a bit terse: "We appoint only such persons as are suggested and recommended by the University of Arkansas and the Extension Department." Dyess addressed his letter to *Mrs. Hattie Caraway*. (Italic emphasis added)<sup>51</sup>

J. T. Mitchell's confidence in judicial influence was misplaced. Arkansas Supreme Court Associate Justice Turner Butler wrote Floyd Sharp on Mitchell's behalf. He had been informed, said the Judge, that one of the farm supervisors at the colony had resigned. His letter attested to Mr. Mitchell's competence and character. Floyd Sharp was not aware of any resignations and regretted that "we cannot give Mr. Mitchell favorable consideration." E. W. Bradbury's position with the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation was terminated and he eschewed the influence of state and national figures in favor of the efforts of local attorneys. Perhaps all politics is local. E.S. Dudley, soon to be Resident Manager, wrote to one of Bradshaw's barrister boosters that, "... I would be very glad to place him on the Colony should I have the opportunity."<sup>52</sup> G. V. Ludlum wanted to run the Colony's cleaning and alteration facilities. With his letter to Floyd Sharp, he enclosed six letters of recommendation from local clothing merchants. He had done the alteration work for all of them and they all praised his skills and speed in dry-cleaning and altering clothing.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Letter to Hon. W.R. Dyess from Hattie Caraway, 21 September 1934; letter to W. R. Dyess from Howard B. Arnold, 20 August 1934; letter to Mrs. Hattie W. Caraway, 25 September 1934, all *Ibid*.

<sup>52</sup> Letter to Leon B. Catlett from E. S. Dudley, Administrator, 19 April 1933, *Ibid*.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to Mr. Floyd Sharp from Turner Butler, 18 December 1936; letter to Floyd Sharp from H. T. Mitchell, 21 December 1936; letter to Hon. Turner Butler from Floyd Sharp, 23 December 1936; letter to Floyd Sharp from G.V. Ludlam, with enclosures, 27 March 1935, all *Ibid*. One final effort to "get on" at Dyess via the application of influence is worthy of consideration. It is worth attention for at least two reasons. First, it is most

The plain and not-so-plain whites discussed thus far seem to have been of the commercial and technical classes. They attempted to use influence because, in their estimation, they had it to use. They were not the most luminary among those who wanted to "get on" at Dyess. Frank Horsfall, past President of Monticello A. & M. College had Governor Futrell write to Dyess on his behalf. Dr. H. D. Burrus in application as Physician to the Colony did not include any letters of recommendation. He listed Little Rock and North Little Rock politicians as references, among them: one editor, two lawyers, three ex-county judges, and two postmasters, one of whom he "helped to make Mayor of North Little Rock three different times." Dr. Burrus barely mentioned his experience and made absolutely no references to his medical education or membership in any medical society. He did say, however, that he was "wearing a \$5.00 hat I won on Roosevelt." J. G. Waskam, Attorney and Counselor at Law from Marked Tree was informed that former governor, "J. M. Futrell will be replaced in his official capacity as attorney for Dyess Colony, Arkansas." Floyd Sharp answered his application and

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representative of the manner in which plain whites attempted to use others' influence. The letter of application and the enclosed references are polite, to the point, and professional. The second reason this particular applicant attracts attention is his son's tragic end. Vincent W. Foster of Hope, Arkansas wanted a position as a purchasing agent for the Colony. He asked for an interview and enclosed highly complimentary letters from two building and lumber companies in Hope, Arkansas. There is no record of Mr. Foster's employment at Dyess Colony. The name is familiar because the son of this, at one time, un-employed dispossessed white achieved prominence and influence exceeding that of any of the letter-writers and petitioners. In the opening days of the Clinton Presidency, Vincent W. Foster, Jr., attorney and advisor to the most powerful man in the Western World met his death under by his own hand on the George Washington Parkway in suburban Washington, D. C. Letter to W.R. Dyess from Vincent W. Foster; to W.R. Dyess from Al Harris, Hope Building Material Company; to W. R. Dyess from J. R. Williams and Sons, all *Ibid*.

informed him that “our present attorney is under a three-year contract, and there is no plan or possibility of his being replaced in the near future.”<sup>54</sup>

Other job seekers, without influence or not confident with it, tried different ways to crack the code. Letters from ex-servicemen cited their veteran’s status as justification for some kind of job. Others described their skill as a barber or beautician, well driller, carpenter, painter – and some tried to convince officials of the value of specialized talents. Mrs. W.H. Shopach wanted to know if Dyess did not see the value of hiring someone to teach the colonists “how to can all sorts of vegetables, fruits and meats as we have owned and can with a steam presser (*sic*) cooker for the last five (5) years.”<sup>55</sup>

Regardless of the common wisdom propagated by Erskine Caldwell and H.L. Mencken about rural southerners and hillbillies, people who tried to “get on” at Dyess appear to be unremarkably normal. There is very little dramatic and pity-inducing verbiage in their letters. They do admit to needing a job, and some emphasize that point most, but their letters are measured, thoughtful and focused, as were the people who wrote them. Some of the letters contained grammar, spelling, and syntax errors, but most supplicants carefully composed their letters; some approached eloquence. “You will be greatly esteemed if you will let me know whether there is a position open for an ‘all-around’ instructor and leader for the educational, social, and home activities in your plans for the Farm Community in Mississippi County, Arkansas.”<sup>56</sup> Those critics who seek

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<sup>54</sup> Letter to W.R. Dyess from J.M. Futrell, 11 January 1935; Letter to W.E.(*sic*) Dyess from Dr. H.D. Burrus, 23 July 1934; letter to Hon. Floyd Sharp from J.G. Waskam, 25 October 1938; Sharp to Waskom, 8 November 1938, all *ibid*.

<sup>55</sup> All letters in WPA Administration File, Box 8.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to W. R. Dyess from (Mrs.) Virginia Hay, 11 July 1934.

evidence of a degraded culture or a puny work ethic in the society and culture of unfortunate plain white victims of the Great Depression will be disappointed with the writing of those that tried to “get on” at Dyess. A much greater number of people tried to “get in” than tried to “get on.” Their letters are more dramatic, complicated, poignant, pitiful, and interesting.

#### Getting “in” at Dyess

Fred Westbrook did “not want to come to the Colony myself until I get well.” His letter of application suggested, instead, that he send his wife and ten children. He was confident that his family could clear the ground and make a crop the first year. He had six boys and two girls, ranging in age from two to twenty-three living with him. He was confident in his labor force, not as one would suspect, because of the supple and firm muscles of healthy and vibrant youngsters; he depended on his wife. “My wife is a hard-working woman and that (*sic*) why I want her and the boys to get a good nice home where she and the boys can pay for it. My wife is 32 years old and she needs to be where she can work good land and make something. Every body will tell you she is a good woman and she will work. . .” Westbrook had not read, obviously, the 1931 Delta Experiment Station report; he expected that a 20-acre Delta farm could make a nice living for a family of ten. Perhaps he was an exception, his wife, after all was a hard-working woman. Westbrook’s letter is illustrative of a disconcerting reality of the Dyess Colony; his letter making application for admission to the Colony was probably futile.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Letter to Mr. W.R. Dyess from Fred Westbrook, 25 October 1934, WPA Administration File. M. G. Vaiden, J. O. Smith, and W. E. Ayres, Bulletin No. 290, “Making Cotton Cheaper: Can Present Production Costs be Reduced?” Delta Experiment Station, February 1932. The bulletin actually discussed the economics of a farm in which

Colonists were selected according to the larger dictates and goals of Harry Hopkins FERA and notions of land-use planning and a pleasure economy. The Dyess colonists were to come exclusively from those who were currently on the Rural Rehabilitation rolls. Even then, full consideration and opportunity for a potential client even to consider the proposition was left to the judgment, discernment, and common sense of a (often female) "government man." If one had, by heroic measures stayed off the relief rolls, such success disqualified them. Dyess was to be a place where industrious people, who through no fault of their own, had lost their security in agriculture. They, whatever the reason, had failed. Field workers from the Arkansas WPA – then professionalized by borrowing social workers from the Resettlement Administration – were to choose from the very best of the failures. These procedures rankled some; many felt that the Elder Brother had always gotten a raw deal.

Dyess initiated a procedure, retained by Floyd Sharp, by which he answered an applicant's letter. A letter in response informed the applicant that blanks would not be available until September 1934. After that date, the response to the applicant directed him (occasionally her) to their County Rural Rehabilitation office. In response to queries from mayors, Congressmen and other government men, Dyess mailed a standard letter,

The method of selecting families for that colony will be as follows: persons living in the State of Arkansas, who have through this economic emergency lost their property and who have been engaged agriculturally the major portion of their lives; those persons who were accepted for Rural Rehabilitation during 1934 and have made an outstanding success. The

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15 acres were devoted to cotton. Since most farms at Dyess, even after the modifications, were still of 20 acres, since the maximum acreage allotted to cotton was mandated to 1/3 of the cleared acreage (modified downward by the AAA county production committee), and since five of the twenty-acres were mandated as garden and stock acreage, the practical economics of the Delta Experiment Station Bulletin are relevant. A typical Dyess Farm cultivated less than seven acres of cotton.



selection of families will be from all Counties in the State, possibly not on quota but on merit. This selection is to begin about the first of September.<sup>58</sup>

The standard letter contained two notions that merit further consideration. Officials of the New Deal Agencies were aware of the fragile nature of public support. It was important, they thought, for these experimental – critics said radical – projects and programs to be successful and to do it quickly. Early success would keep political opponents and skeptics at bay. This pressure to perform is manifested in the otherwise counterintuitive principle of selecting only those Rural Relief clients who “have made an outstanding success.” The Dyess Colony would select the best of those who had failed; there was no provision for the most desperate.

The assertion that clients would be selected “not on quota but on merit” must have satisfied most folks; it was in consonance with traditional American notions of meritocracy and rugged independence. However, the problems in selecting colonists based on merit or quality of applicants proved to be the most difficult of the many exasperations that bosses faced over the course of the Colony’s existence. Administrators and social workers struggled with questions concerning the nature of merit and how to measure it. As the Colony developed, a surprisingly large number of colonists proved unable or unwilling to adapt, to cooperate. After the first group of colonists arrived in the fall and winter of 1934, the lack of “quality control” in the selection of colonists was painfully apparent. Responsibility for selection devolved to the Resettlement Administration in October 1935. The newly created Resettlement Administration created a series of inventories (blanks, in the vernacular of plain whites)

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<sup>58</sup> Letter to James Engal from W. R. Dyess, 2 July 1934.

to be executed in part by the prospect, but mainly by a hierarchy of social workers and selection specialists. The infusion of personnel from the RA to Dyess resulted in quarrels and resentment. State relief workers resented the attitudes of the RA staff; the Washington bunch doubted the competence of their local colleagues.<sup>59</sup>

For a brief period from early summer until November of 1934, people were encouraged to apply. The controls and standards that would soon dominate the "getting in" process were yet to be developed. The letters of plain whites asking for information or making application were actually a major point of entry into the colonization process; the writers of the early letters actually had a chance to influence the selection process. From about January 1935 and until the end of the process true applicants were selected based on the judgment of the local social worker. Social workers (Regional Interviewers in RA terminology) poured over the records of Rural Rehabilitation clients recommended by the county Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor and chose the applicants that, in their opinion, were most likely to succeed. A process of successively more invasive and personal inventories and interviews winnowed the applicants. Occasionally a letter to Floyd Sharp would interject a potential client into the evaluation system, but for the most part, the process began not with positive actions by the dispossessed but in passivity.

As word got out and the job seekers assaulted the gatekeepers with letters from influential people or arguments, those who wanted or thought they wanted to get in at Dyess also suspected that there was a formula or code. The dispossessed did not know

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<sup>59</sup> Letter to Mrs. Azile Aaron, Resettlement Administration, Washington D.C. from Mrs. Theresa St. Clair, 4 December 1935; "Backdoor report from Eula Gallaher, Transportation Clerk, Dyess Colony to Anzie Aaron, 30, and 25 April and 6 May 1936; Memorandum to Family Selection Staff from Eula Gallagher 30 April 1936; to James B. Lawson from Azile Aaron, 1 May 1936; Lawrence Westbrook to Rexford G. Tugwell, 28 October 1935 all in RG 96.

the preferred attributes required of the successful applicant. They did not know that the government men preferred men forty-five or younger with families. Government men much preferred traditional families and did not view grandmothers and grandfathers as appropriate colonists. The government men did not view the most destitute as apt colonists, nor did they consider those that managed to stay off the Rural Rehabilitation rolls. Families headed by females were ineligible, and men over the age of fifty had little chance of a place at Dyess. Some of the letters revealed information that disqualified, some letters came too late to affect selection, but all of them tell us something about plain whites.<sup>60</sup>

The volume of letters of application or requests for information to and about Dyess Colony to the Arkansas Emergency Relief national offices was robust until mid-November 1934. After that time, such letters are almost non-existent. By mid-November 1934, the processes by which one became a colonist were regularized. Government men selected all potential colonists based on recommendations by social workers, family selection specialists, and to some extent, County Extension Agents. The main reason for the diminution in the flow of applicant and information letters was the success of Dyess officials (including WPA officials) in educating the public.

The letters of application and information from the period of about June – November 1934 are significant. Uncolored by the knowledge of the exact attributes required by a potential colonist, and not sure of what, exactly, it meant to take part in this

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<sup>60</sup> Dot Kennan, "The Procedure Followed in Selecting Applicants for Dyess Colony Project – Mississippi County, Arkansas, n.d., RG 96, Box 182, hereinafter "Procedure Followed." Untitled and hand annotated narrative of Dyess Colony selection process, RG 96, Box 182, hereinafter "Dyess Colony Selection Narrative"; Henson, "Memories of Dyess Colony."

new government project, the writers were sometimes disconcertingly transparent. By virtue of this transparency, investigators are able to hear what plain whites said and, therefore, what they thought about themselves and their government. The letters also authenticate much of the common knowledge concerning the depression South. Some are from people who lived in the highlands; some from those farming in the southwestern river valleys, but many of them are from the dispossessed of the Delta.

Arkansas farmers seemed to have blamed the drought as much as the depression for their current misery. "I have lost everything I have by the depression and the drought," wrote C.R. Astin from Prescott. Astin farmed "on halves" and "only made one bale of cotton this year." He wrote that Dyess could see, "what I have made for myself." Astin had a naïve faith in the efficacy of his letter. He inquired whether he could keep his cow and if the government would provide transportation; if so would the transportation be by train or truck and could he bring his cow. Did one pay rent to the government, did the government furnish a team and tools? Concluding his letter he informed Dyess that he was ready to go anytime – "I would like to keep my cow if there is any chance" – and that he expected answers to his query by return mail, because, "I am in need of a place at once."<sup>61</sup>

Mack Davis of McCrorey allowed that he was "living in the heat of this drought stricken district, won't make any feed or food for 1935." Davis blamed the drought and the "down fall in price of cotton of 1930" for his continued indebtedness. He felt that his explanation sufficed, "I feel like I deserve some help." Other references to the drought are fleeting but powerful. "I am a tenant farmer and have a team of horses and without

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<sup>61</sup> Letter to W. R. Dyess from C.R. Astin, 13 October 1934, WPA File.

any farming tools. The drouth (*sic*) came and I don't know what to do" said R. H. Shaw of Ferndale; Joe Bizzault wrote (Mrs.) Senator Caraway that, "by us having such a drouth (*sic*) it is going to be impossible for me to pay it this fall." The "it" Mr. Bizzault referenced was the \$150.00 he owed the government from the previous year. Similarly, Wes Mauldin felt it necessary to address his arrears to the government before presenting his argument for inclusion in the colony project. "I am a rehabilitator here in Woodruff County and received a mule this year, but the crops burned so badly they are not of much value. However, it was no fault of mine." Typical are the numerous matter-of-fact references: "My crop I have in is completely burned up . . . my garden burned up here on account of the drought." "Due to the 12 weeks drouth (*sic*) we have had we are making nothing to speak of." The letters mentioned above and cited in the footnote below contain much more than observations about the great drought that created the dustbowl.<sup>62</sup>

The letters are rarely one-dimensional; most letters tie several depression – drought phenomena together. The following letter, produced below in its entirety is typical as to content, and illustrative of the language skills extant in some of these plain whites.

Dear Sir,

We read in the Tulsa Tribune about the Colony at Dyess Ark. for the Rehabilitation of Tenant Farmers. We want to know if there is any way possible for us to get one of the farms. The project sounds wonderful.

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<sup>62</sup> Letter to W. R. Dyess from Mack Davis, 8 October 1934; letter to Mrs. Hattie Caraway from Joe Bizzault, 3 October 1934; letter to W. R. Dyess from Wes Mauldin, 26 September 1934; letter to Dear Sir from Joe Cornell, 31 July 1934; letter to W. R. Dyess from L. J. Burnett (?), all in WPA File. For the drought see: Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *As Rare as Rain: Federal Relief in the Great Southern Drought of 1930/31*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985).

My husband and I are tenant farmers on the farm of Mr. & Mrs. E. V. Poyner, we were farming on the halves. We have never been on Relief before, but will have to ask for aid within the next few days.

Everything we planted has been burned out by the drouth (*sic*). We had 14 acres of corn, 12 acres of oats, 15 acres of peas, 2 acres of tomatoes, 1 acre of peanuts, one acre of beans. We can't get our seed back from any of them, to say nothing of the fertilizer. We put about 3 sacks of fertilizer to the acre, under our oats, beans, tomatoes & potatoes. We planted 2 sacks of potatoes.

The corn didn't tassle (*sic*). The oats didn't get big enough to mow. The peas didn't come up. The tomatoes are standing just like we put them out, haven't grown at all. The peanuts haven't a peanut on them. We got about 2 ½ sacks of potatoes. We had a lovely garden started, but only got two or three meals out of it and canned six quarts of green peas.

We are a young couple, twenty-eight and thirty years old, respectively. No children, Healthy, able bodied, willing to work. Averagely intelligent, I hope. Averagely educated, my husband has a year in High School and I a year in College. We are both experienced farmers raised on the farm. My husband is a good mechanic, fair carpenter, good teamster, and experienced on the timber. I have kept books, taught school, and am a typist.

We note that there will be about two hundred farms ready for occupancy by the first of Nov. We would love to get one of the first as one of us could work thru the winter and so escape being on charity. We have tried so hard to make our own way. The idea of charity is bitter. Neither of us have anyone to turn to for aid, except the government. We are so eager to get a place of our own, with the opportunity to pay for it. We are hoping, rather desperately, that this may be our chance. Will you please advise us if there is a chance, and our method of procedure?<sup>63</sup>

One would suppose, if the letter is an accurate reflection of their history, the Barton's, would have been ideal candidates for Dyess Colony. They had already bought into the notion of diversified farming as is evidenced by the crops planted. They were willing to pay the ancillary costs of agricultural production – they had used at least forty sacks of fertilizer – they were, as a couple, articulate and energetic. Mr. and Mrs. J. A. Barton had

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<sup>63</sup> Letter to W. R. Dyess from Mr. and Mrs. S. J. Barton, 1 August 1934, WPA Administrative File.

tried tenant farming on the thin-soiled highlands of Springdale, Arkansas. Would not their youth, health, industry, willingness to diversify, experience, and ancillary skills not make them ideal candidates through which to illustrate the validity of the New Deal notions as to the creation and preservation of the American yeoman? The answer was, in a word, no. The Barton's were not Rural Rehabilitation Clients. They had not failed soon enough to be eligible.

The crop reduction programs of the AAA had little significance for truck-patch farmers from Northwest Arkansas. Life at Dyess colony, in the heart of the Great American Delta, presented circumstances foreign to the experiences and expectations of many of the applicants. Later the aberrant conditions in the Delta proved intolerable for some of the colonists. They were not used to mud, or malaria, or snakes in their fields. Like much of the public, they assumed that cotton cultivation was simply a variation on a theme. Letters from folks who lived in the Delta, who were familiar with the sharecropping system and the nature of cotton cultivation, discuss issues and offer insight that should have made them more attractive to the family selection specialists. Some of the applicants understood the fundamental differences in farming "black land" and the soils of the timber or prairie. Some had experienced the devastating effects of the AAA contracts. The third crisis, referenced above, was a function of a series of misapplications, misunderstandings, egregious arrogance, and the frailty of human nature. The selection specialists could not have chosen only those familiar with the vagaries of the Delta even if they had desired to do so. The RRC mandated colonists proportionally from the entire state of Arkansas. Problems soon emerged.

Building Dyess Colony offered jobs and political influence. Floyd Sharp in particular and the Board of Directors in general maneuvered to remove Dyess Colony from the supervision and control of other federal officials and agencies. Such independence and the potential political power actuated a struggle for control. This chapter has examined letters of application from plain whites and their interaction with the bosses and government men.

The first colonists moved into their new homes at Dyess just about the same time that the homesteaders moved into their new houses in Tupelo. Understanding the common reasons, if any, for the failure of the Tupelo Homesteads, the best of the DSH projects and Dyess Colony, the largest and most promising of the New Deal agrarian communities, requires a consideration of the life and times at Dyess colony.



## CHAPTER V

### LIFE AND TIMES AT DYESS COLONY

**"Oh! Mr. Dyess I have just been crazy since I read about this in the papers."** Mrs. Emery Hall, Lake City, Arkansas, 21 June 1934.

**"Since I can't write an official letter about the situation at Dyess, I'm going to slip a note through the backdoor."** Eula Gallagher, Resettlement Administration Transportation Clerk, Little Rock, 6 May 1935.

***"Personally I cannot understand why out of all the families that we have at Dyess we cannot find four clerks."*** Lawrence Westbrook, WPA Administrator, 18 April 1938.

***"Someone like this is the cause of dissention among what few deserving colonists that you have. People with one good eye and half sense should know that they have a good chance over there if everyone would cooperate."*** (Mrs.) Velma Bullard Pittman, 21 April 1938.<sup>1</sup>

Between 21 June and 6 October 1934, Mrs. Emery Hall wrote four letters to W.R. Dyess, Arkansas ERA Administrator and founder of what would be known as Dyess Colony. The thirty-six pages of small but neat handwriting on school-tablet paper is a commentary on the struggle of dispossessed whites and one witness to the conditions in the Great American Delta. Mr. Hall "doesn't write well," she explained, no doubt uncomfortable (or pretending to be) with speaking on behalf of the family. Her letters continually asked Dyess for advice; should she enroll her children in school in Lake City, or should she wait until they moved. They were going to get to move, weren't they? Should she sell one of her three hogs to buy feed in order to fatten the other two? "I can't

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to W.R Dyess from Mrs. Emery Hall, 21 June 1934; letter to Azile Aaron, Liaison Senior Family Selection Specialist, 6 May 1934; letter to Floyd Sharp from C.E McCaffey, 21 April 1936; letter to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, 9 April, 1938; letter to Westbrook from Sharp, 18 April 1938, all in University of Arkansas, Special Collections, WPA Administration File, MS UN 3, hereinafter "WPA Administration File." Letter to Floyd Sharp from (Mrs.) Velma Bullard Pittman, 21 April 1938, RG 69, WPA Central Office Records, Roll 1745, Box 339, hereinafter "WPA Central Office Files."

afford to buy books in both places.” She had canned blackberries and kraut and pickles. People said that folks who had a mule would not get one of farms; the Halls had a government mule, did this disqualify them? She saved the sorghum tops for planting on the new place. If she could hear soon from Mr. Dyess she would not sell her chicken-coop; she would take it with her to the new farm. Could her bachelor brother and widowed mother move with them? The government didn’t give enough feed to fatten hogs. People said the farms were only for “families of 2, 3, 4, and 5 people.” There were eight in her family. Her mother could keep house and her brother could help her clear the land while Mr. Hall worked “public work to keep up expenses.” She was tired of moving from “here and there,” and tired of “making a living for the other man.” Could Mr. Hall do public work to “keep up our expenses,” while she and her mother and bachelor brother and three children cleared the land for spring planting? She wanted to get there in time to put in a winter garden, she said. She would, she said, “do just anything to get one of the farms,” and if Mr. Dyess would just give her some encouragement, she would “not say a word to a soul about it.” “Reckon,” she asked, “just when we will get to move?” They had to move and had no money to pay rent; the new schoolteacher was moving into her place, and nobody wanted to rent to them because they did not want truck patches. “Please don’t get out of patients (*sic*) with me,” she implored repeatedly, “I know you are worked to death and I am just one of the poor people you are trying to help.” Should she send her thirteen-year-old daughter to the Convent where she could learn practical things like sewing and cooking instead of the schools at the new farm? “I sure hope we will be one of the lucky ones.” “Does it have to be the man that works? I can do anything any other woman can do, I could be a visiting housekeeper, or wash dishes at the café, my

mother can keep house while I work and Mr. Hall and my brother can work the farm. Oh! Mr. Dyess, I so want one of the farms, if you only knew how we have struggled you would help us.”<sup>2</sup>

Mrs. Emery Hall and her family moved into their new home at Dyess Colony, House No. 10, on 12 December 1934. They brought with them their Rural Rehabilitation debt of \$826.27 and their government mule.<sup>3</sup>

Plain whites moved to Dyess and began community building; their interaction with government men and bosses is one consideration of this chapter. The officials at Dyess ignored basic fundamental realities about farming in the Delta and client selection. As a result, the Colony's population was unstable; most of the clients were unable or unwilling to establish and maintain a subsistence farm. This chapter also notes the federal government's first rational assault on rural poverty in the South.

### Moving to Dyess

By October 1934, Cone Murphy and his crew had completed the cottages and infrastructure for eighty-three farms. “The Original Thirteen,” so-called because they came from thirteen Arkansas counties, families moved to Dyess on 25 October 1934 and by April 1935, Dyess Colony was home to 132 families, all selected by the Arkansas Emergency Relief Administration. W. H. “Harve” Smith, one of the original thirteen, was an unqualified success story. Smith was a Bassett County cash renter and had been

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<sup>2</sup> The narrative and quotes are taken from a series of four letters from Mrs. Emery Hall to W.R. Dyess, Arkansas WPA Administrator, 21 June, 21 August, 25 August, and 6 October 1934, all in WPA Administrative File. Mrs. Hall consistently spelled Mr. Hall's name Emery, the Dyess records consistently spell it Emory. Mrs. Hall's spelling is probably the correct one.

<sup>3</sup> Henson, “Dyess Colony 1934, Sorted by Name”; “Analysis of Colony Accounts”; all in “WPA Administrative File.”

so all his adult life. The ruinous cotton prices of 1933 left Smith in a precarious financial condition. He had to sell his team and tools to repay debts, and he was unable because, said an RA report, of planter preference for black laborers to secure a cropper position. In May of 1934, Harve Smith received a loan from the Arkansas Rural Relief Corporation (RRC) and immediately proved that he was a competent farmer. Smith, rented land from the RRC, bought a mule, one hundred chickens, a cow with calf, enough feed for the upcoming winter, and had canned a large stock of vegetables and fruit. He also paid his Rural Rehabilitation loan. Smith was one of the very best that had failed – and an ideal candidate for the Dyess Colony. Smith's family moved from a leaky three-room shack – when it rained they had to move all the furniture into the one room with a sound roof – into a brand new five-room house on thirty acres of Delta land.<sup>4</sup>

J. R. Echols, father of ten and another of the original thirteen Colonists moved to Dyess in October of 1934. Echols attended an Arkansas college and worked for that institution as Farm Manager; he lost his job when the funding for his position expired. He had been a good Rural Rehabilitation Client, and his family seemed to prosper at Dyess. The government men quickly came to understand, but were often reluctant to admit, that poverty did not always signify incompetence. The Echols children were quite remarkable; they had to leave Dyess to prove it.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Dot Kennan, "The Procedure Followed in Selecting Applicants for Dyess Colony Project – Mississippi County, Arkansas, n.d., RG 96, Box 182, hereinafter "Procedure Followed." Floyd Sharp and Associates, "Traveling Recovery Road," 156-158. Untitled and hand annotated narrative of Dyess Colony selection process, RG 96, Box 182, hereinafter "Dyess Colony Selection Narrative"; Henson, "Memories of Dyess Colony."

<sup>5</sup> "Dyess Selection Narrative"; Henson, "Memories of Dyess Colony." One daughter married an Air Force Chaplain who became a Lt. Col. One son became an electrician and retired as a Major in the U.S. Army. Another son earned his Ph. D. in forestry from Yale,

Dyess Colony used the Harve Smith family as an example of the promise of Dyess. Notwithstanding Smith's success, W.R. Dyess and the Arkansas Emergency Relief Administration and Rural Rehabilitation Corporation were not pleased. Farmland that could be in cultivation lay fallow; the economic activity predicted for the town had not materialized because there were few colonists at Dyess. Among the few colonists at Dyess some, apparently, were not interested in a life-long commitment to subsistence farming; some were troublemakers.<sup>6</sup>

The actual process of selecting and transporting families to the colonies proved to be too complex for the limited resources and expertise of Arkansas Rural Relief Corporation and its parent, the Arkansas Emergency Relief Administration. Despite the Smith family's success story, the family selection process was both slow and, generally, unsatisfactory. During the eight months October 1934 through May 1935, 162 families had moved to Dyess, but twenty-nine families returned to their old homes. Some left because they could not get a straight answer about the terms and price of their new farms; some could not stand the mud and snakes; and some did not understand southern social customs. A colonist identified only as "being from the western part of the state" clearly did not understand or care much for southern social customs. He solicited the black workmen at the colony as boarders and allowed them entrance to his house; he was

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and other children were journalists and educators. The NYA paid for Katherine Echols' tuition at the Sate Normal School and she was a member of the faculty at Dyess Schools until 1940.

<sup>6</sup> Kennan, "Procedure Followed"; "Dyess Colony Selection Narrative," all RG 96. Sharp and Associates, "Traveling Recovery Road." "Plans and Progress" type-script narrative FSA and Predecessor Agencies, Project Records, 1935-1940, Arkansas, RG 96, hereinafter, "Plans and Progress."

dismissed. There were other problems with the family selection process that only time revealed. Two families were "somewhat extreme" in their religious fervency and they "kept the entire community stirred up," and Mrs. Emory Hall's neighbor, S. B. Funk, who moved his family into No 8 on 11 November, proved to be a radical agitator. Clearly, the process needed alteration.<sup>7</sup>

The New Deal seemed to be catching its breath during late spring of 1935. W. R. Dyess and the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation halted the selection and transportation of colonists to Colonization Project No. 1. Changes were in the wind. On 8 April 1935, Congress passed the \$4.8 billion Emergency Relief Appropriations Act. Soon a flurry of progressive legislation, Executive Orders, and reorganization culminated in what many historians label the Second New Deal. Among the new entities in the alphabet soup were the National Youth Administration (NYA), Rural Electrification Administration (REA), and the Works Progress Administration (WPA). By the summer of 1935, the intent of the New Deal to undertake social reform was apparent. Legislation and Executive Orders focused on social security, securities, banking and tax reform, and labor legislation. The New Deal also began its rational and organized assault on rural poverty with the formation through Executive Order 7027, 30 April 1935, of the Resettlement Administration (RA). Under the direction of Rexford Tugwell, the RA assumed control of the FERA rural programs, administration of the FERA land program,

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<sup>7</sup> "Dyess Colony Selection Narrative"; Everett Dewey Henson, "Dyess Colony 1934, Sorted by Name, Sorted by Date Became Colonist, and Sorted by Homestead Number," WPA Administrative File. "Plans and Progress." Letter from E. S. Dudley to H. C. Baker, 3 May 1938, RG 69 "WPA Central Office Files."

functions of the land section of the AAA, and the Division of Subsistence Homesteads communities.<sup>8</sup>

While the transition to RA management caused a slight retardation in the development of the Tupelo Homesteads, it proved remarkably efficient in filling up the farms at Dyess. By September, a new selection process was well underway. Lawrence Westbrook with Harry Hopkins and the WPA entered into an agreement with Rexford Tugwell of the RA that facilitated the family selection process. The Management Division of the Resettlement Administration agreed to assume the responsibility for selection and transportation and installed Senior Family Selection Specialist Clark C. Tucker at Dyess. The Management Division "borrowed" and placed on the payroll nine social workers from the Arkansas ERA, a public health nurse from the same agency, and augmented that force with four RA Family Selection Specialists. Jimmy Lawson finished his work at Tupelo, moved to Little Rock, and joined the Management Division staff of Region VI of the Resettlement Administration.

From Washington, D.C., Liaison Supervisor Azile Aaron, after a visit to Dyess, organized the processes and training for the new and borrowed RA selection personnel. Aaron recruited Eula Gallagher to head the incredibly complex movement of families and their possessions to (and sometimes from) Dyess. With employees in place, new blanks, and revised procedures and training materials in order, the RA began bringing new colonists to Dyess in January 1936. RA officials orchestrated the plan to correct the deficiencies in the selection process and to fill the colony between the crop seasons.

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<sup>8</sup> Several scholars have provide fuller discussion of the programs assumed by the R.A. In addition to the works of Paul Conkin and Donald Holley, cited previously, the most comprehensive and analytical discussion is that of: Bernard Stershner, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 279-306.

Dyess Colony's "independent status" caused Rexford Tugwell some trepidation. However, Tugwell, and, indeed, the entire Washington community, assumed that Dyess, upon completion of its construction and occupation stage, would naturally fall under the control of the RA. Tugwell grudgingly accepted the notion that the RA would acquire Dyess upon completion of family selection process. Item 3 in the agreement concerning the RA's role in colonist selection clearly reveals the intent. In a letter to Tugwell, Westmoreland wrote, "We agree to provide funds for the maintenance and subsistence of these families until the project is finally completed and *transferred to your administration for management.*" (Italic emphasis added) One wonders what might have been Tugwell's response had he known of Floyd Sharp's notions about Dyess's future. By forming a corporate entity for Dyess Colony, Floyd Sharp had effectively made Dyess independent of any governmental entity short of the Secretary of Agriculture of the United States. Dyess Colony, Pine Mountain Valley, and Cherry Lake Farms were the objects of intense ridicule and bitter criticism. The three quasi-independent agencies were identified with the RA, and yet Tugwell and his staff had no management authority or fiscal oversight. Critics often used the aggregate expenditures and the relatively few clients of the three projects to exaggerate the inefficiencies of the huge resettlement program. By including the costs of the three orphan agencies in analysis of the RA, critics exaggerated the per-capita costs of the program. Tugwell and the RA were in the classic management conundrum; they were responsible for the projects but had no authority over them. By May of that year, the process was complete.

In five months, the RA selected and moved 347 families to Dyess. In contrast, the Arkansas FERA had placed 132 families over an eight-month period. Tugwell's



reference to the projects ultimate completion is significant. Dyess's original plans, as approved by FERA, envisioned the completion of the project after about four years. During that time, the Colonists would have signed their land contracts, assumed ownership of the ancillary business (icehouse, shops, store, etc), and established a live-at-home agricultural program that maximized the returns on the limited cotton acreage. According to the plans, a twenty-acre farm would cultivate about eight acres of cotton. In reality, the local AAA cotton production committee slighted the Dyess farmers in allocating tax-free acreage. Ultimately, with fervent appeals and complaints from Floyd Sharp and Lawrence Westbrook, the Colonists were granted more reasonable allotments. Typically, the production committee allotted acreage cotton at the rate of eight acres per 20-acre farm.<sup>9</sup>

"Government mules" posed few problems for newly employed Resettlement Administration Transportation clerk Eula Gallaher. As early as July of 1934 the Arkansas RRC had distributed over 2,000 mules at an average cost of \$175.00. The "synthetic mule," i.e., "one that exists only on paper" caused most of the aggravation and expense. Stock trucks arrived to transport the work stock to Dyess only to find that the

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<sup>9</sup> "Dyess Colony Selection Narrative." Letter to Rexford Tugwell from Lawrence Westbrook, 28 October 1935; Letter to Westbrook from Tugwell, 4 November 1935. "Memorandum concerning the relationship between the Management Division of the Resettlement Administration and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration in the matter of four communities temporarily retained by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration for the purposes of completion of reconstruction." signed by Rexford G. Tugwell and Harry L. Hopkins, 12 July 1935, all in WPA Administration File. For the struggle to get adequate cotton allotments, see: Floyd Sharp to C.C. Randall, Chairman, State Allotment Board, Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1 September 1937, WPA Administrative File. For Tugwell's reluctance but ultimate willingness to assume responsibility for Dyess see Bernard Sternsher, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 194-237; 292- 95.

government mule had been repossessed, or stolen, or had died, or “got lost.” Trucks returned to Dyess often only partially loaded. From her office in Little Rock, Eula Gallagher designed, implemented, and supervised the complex ballet of visits, inspection trips, and moves. In conspiratorial and mildly sarcastic prose in her periodic “back-door notes” to Liaison Family Specialist Azile Aaron, she reported on the few virtues and numerous faults of the Arkansas WPA crew.<sup>10</sup>

The RA benefited from the experience of the Rural Rehabilitation Corporation (RRC) in selecting and moving families to the Colony. For example, the blanks used by the RRC personnel in winnowing prospects failed to include comprehensive queries about the occupation of the head of household. Some applicants were more interested in working for wages than in building capital; some of the first group had only a tenuous connection with farming. Likewise, the RRC blanks did not include provisions for listing various farm implements owned by the prospect. Sometimes the moving truck and crew from Dyess arrived to move a Colonist’s agricultural stock and implements only to find that among the possessions were such bulky and difficult-to-transport items as farm wagons. The new policies mandated by the Washington office required that all colonists visit and undergo a final examination of their attitudes about cooperation, farm life, religion, drinking, morality, personal hygiene, and intelligence; the Colony physician, L. L. Huebner, conducted a physical exam of each prospect. The prospective colonists visited to make sure they could tolerate the physical and fiscal aberrations connected with

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<sup>10</sup> “Back Door Report,” letters to Azile Aaron, from Eula Gallagher, 21, 25 April, 1 May 1935; letter to Lawrence Westbrook from John H. Caufield, 7 July 1934, all in WPA Administration File. Caufield seems to have worked officially as a photographer, but also as an informant to Westbrook.

colonization. They visited, also, to choose the particular farm and house they would, perhaps someday, own. The prospective visitors to Dyess came, ostensibly, to inspect and decide whether the opportunity was worth the risk. The staff at Dyess used the inspection trip to conduct the final examination of potential colonists.<sup>11</sup>

The tasks confronting the RA Family Selection Specialists were daunting, but their tasks were relatively simple in comparison to the logistics problems confronting Gallagher. The newly crafted and revised procedures for family selection, the product of the RA Management Division staff in Washington, introduced a new group of government men and another series of blanks to execute. Operating from ten regional offices throughout Arkansas, the Field Interviewers investigated the credentials of families recommended by the county Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor. There were, of course, blanks for each stage of the process. For a brief while, the RA continued to use the blanks created by the Arkansas RRC. The blanks involved Forms A, B, and C. Each form – A, B, and C – required numerous supplements. For example, Form C, “Case Workers Analysis” required six “schedules.” The RA forms were more detailed. By November of 1935, the RA unleashed its own flood of blanks, which were fed to a distribution list that required copies be dispensed to the caseworker, county welfare supervisor, county Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor, the Region VI Office of the RA in

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<sup>11</sup> Kennan, “Dyess Colony Selection Narrative,” WPA Administration File; “Procedure Followed, RG 96. Social Research Report NO. 1, John B. Holt, “An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used in Selecting Families for Colonization Projects,” (Washington, D.C: United States Department of Agriculture, Farm Security Administration, and Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Cooperating, 1937). How much and what kind of intelligence was a difficult item for Family Planning Specialists to attack. See the two documents referenced above.

Little Rock, then finally, to Dyess Colony. The Senior Family Selection Specialist, Clark Tucker, made the final decision.<sup>12</sup>

Some of the original group of colonists had moved to Dyess without benefit of an inspection visit. New RA rules demanded that all prospective colonists – husband, wife, and teen-aged children visit the colony and undergo a physical exam. Since the language of the original FERA grant mandated that the program benefit Arkansas residents statewide, each county in Arkansas was assigned a quota at Dyess. The task of efficiently getting the prospective colonists to Dyess was colossal. Dyess is in the extreme northeast corner of Arkansas; the distances were, sometimes, enormous.

The Colony bought two brand new school buses, and following a carefully drawn route, picked up poor folks all over the state of Arkansas and brought them to Dyess for a two-night visit and return from whence they came. Twice a week, on Sunday and Thursday, the Colony school buses brought a new group to inspect and be inspected. Eula Gallagher contacted the proposed colonists, determined, more or less, how close the bus could actually get to the prospects' homes, and informed the prospects of when and where, roughly, they were to meet the bus. She then stood by awaiting the problems that inevitably occurred. One family, in an area that was inaccessible by the bus, agreed to meet the bus at a service station on the nearest paved road. Anxious lest they miss the

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<sup>12</sup> "Dyess Selection Narrative," WPA Administration File. Kennan, "Procedure Followed, RG 96. The forms themselves give an idea of the winnowing process. Form A "Case Worker Analysis asks the "case-worker" to give an opinion as to attitudes and even personality. For example, the form asks the caseworker to evaluate the family's "general intelligence," and to comment on such subjective areas as to whether or not the religious affiliation of the family was "extreme or emotional." Form B is a rather short (13 items) general questionnaire about previous and current occupation, special skills, etc. Form C is an exhaustive financial analysis with six separate schedules.

bus, the family decided to camp out at the designated spot the night before. That night the area received a rare four inches of snow and the family had not brought tents. They huddled around a fire built on the lee side of the station's wall and completed their inspection trip. Gallagher attempted to have every bus arrive full or nearly so. The remarkable fact is that she, mostly, succeeded. In the five months, January to May, the two Colony school buses traveled an aggregate of 26,532 miles.<sup>13</sup>

The aggravations and problems of the inspection visits paled in comparison to the actual moves. It took on the average two and one-half trucks and three days to move a family to Dyess; it took ten trucks a week to move four families. A moving crew composed of Dyess work-relief clients rushed to unload the trucks and send them back to the wilds of rural Arkansas. Invariably trucks got stuck. A client who lived relatively near Dyess gave written directions to his house and commented that the five-mile dirt road to his house was fine as long as it did not rain; but, after the first mile, it began to rain. The buckshot ground captured the truck and only after hours, and the frantic search for a tractor, did the family finally arrive at Dyess. In a cold, rainy March afternoon and night and into the morning, the mother tried to keep her five-month old infant warm and contented in the cab of a freight truck. At 2 a.m., a tractor extricated the truck from the mud. At the peak of moving in the spring of 1936, the Colony used sixty FERA trucks and crews to move colonists to Dyess. In one week in April, eighteen families moved to

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<sup>13</sup> Eula Gallagher, "Resume of Procedure and Problems of Planning Transportation and Moving Families to Dyess Colony," typescript in and Predecessor Agencies, Project Records, 1935-1940, Arkansas, RG 96, hereinafter "Resume of Procedures."

Dyess. The cavalcade of tarpaulin-covered trucks and the thrice-weekly buses full of inspectors made for confusing and exciting times at Dyess.<sup>14</sup>

The selection process was complete and Eula Gallagher was in the process of closing up shop on 30 April 1936. She had just used her considerable diplomatic skills to wheedle information from Jimmy Lawson. Lawson had called the day before to obtain the mailing addresses of the field inspectors. Her suspicions, which she had discussed with Azile Aaron, were confirmed: the RA was "out" at Dyess. Careful conversation and interrogation revealed that Lawson was preparing a "pink slip" for all the RA staffers and most of the borrowed ERA personnel. Her note to the family selection staff informed them of their termination as of 1 May, wished them well, and expressed satisfaction in their associations. She also felt a need to soften the ripples that her abrasive personality had inflicted on her colleagues. "If I have made myself obnoxious in my efforts to get the staff to furnish adequate directions, and inventories, I wish to say that it was never personal, and only done for the good of the cause. I trust it will not linger in your mind when you think of me in the future."<sup>15</sup> Eula Gallagher often demonstrated her acerbic wit and droll personality in her commentary. On hearing that her colleague, Miss Topping, would take on a more permanent job with the RA in Arkansas, she related to Azile Aaron that she had tried to get in touch with Miss Topping: "...since she was coming here I wanted to congratulate the state of Arkansas and offer her my sympathy

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Memo to The Family Selection Staff from Eula Gallagher, 30 April 1936, Project Records, RG 96.

and condolences.”<sup>16</sup> Perhaps Gallagher was a martinet, but there was reason for satisfaction. Azile Aaron reported that as of 1 May 1936, all the farm cottages except for fifteen kept in reserve, were occupied. The RA had proved remarkably efficient in the family and selection process.<sup>17</sup>

By the time that the dual ceremony memorializing W.R. Dyess and dedicating the colony took place on 22 May 1936, Dyess, Arkansas was beginning to resemble the community that Dyess had envisioned. The robust school age population had sent Dyess to Washington D. C. where he managed to get a commitment from WPA officials to build modern new schools for Dyess Colony. On 14 January, Dyess was returning from D C. with good news for the Colony; early that evening the small commercial flight crashed into Arkansas Delta swamps about forty miles west of Memphis. Lawrence Westbrook came from Washington and joined Floyd Sharp, H.C. Baker, R.C. Limerick and Arkansas Governor J. Marion Futrell to honor the memory of the Colony's founder and to dedicate the renamed agrarian experiment. It would be officially what it always had been in the minds of the clients and staff, Dyess Colony.<sup>18</sup>

In retrospect, one can argue that the high-water mark for Dyess Colony was May-June 1936. Never again would the population of Dyess be as great as in the early

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<sup>16</sup> “Back Door Report,” letter to Azile Aaron from Eula Gallagher, 25 April 1936.

<sup>17</sup> Letter (Back Door Report) to Azile Aaron from Eula Gallagher 25 and 30 April 1936; letter to Azile Aaron from Therese St. Clair, 25 April 1936; letter to James B. Lawson from Azile Aaron, 1 May 1936, all in RG 96.

<sup>18</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 16-17 January, 22-23 May, 1936; *Colony Herald*, 1, 22 May, 1936; *Mississippi County Sentinel*, 22 May 1936; *Commercial Appeal*, 22-23 May 1936; *Press Scimitar*, 22-23 May, 1936. Henson, “Memories of Dyess,” RG 96. “Minutes: Meeting of Board of Directors, Dyess Colony, Incorporated, 25 March 1936,” WPA Administration File.

summer of 1936. The festivities marking the dedication were impressive, but they failed to generate the enthusiasm or the crowds that inundated Dyess in early June. Eleanor Roosevelt stood on the porch of the Administration Building on 9 June and told the crowd of more than 2,500 that she expected that the success at Dyess would spill over into the nation at large. "I hope that you down here will derive gains which may be used to help other people. For as you grow you will find your greatest pleasure in giving others a helping hand."<sup>19</sup> Even though dinner for the First Lady and various Dyess bosses was waiting at the Colony café, Eleanor Roosevelt insisted on shaking hands with everyone. Her insistence on intimate contact wrecked her schedule, just as it had inconvenienced the President in Tupelo twenty months earlier.<sup>20</sup>

#### Living at Dyess

Affairs looked good in the late spring and early summer of 1936. Five hundred farm cottages, sporting brilliant white paint and trimmed in brown, red, or green clustered in quartets at the intersections of the latticework gridiron of spirit-level straight roads. The exterior of the farm cottage was of cypress, the interior pine. Windows were screened, the roof was ceiled, and water was available just outside the kitchen door. Each farm cottage had a hand-pump operated well, a claw-footed enameled bathtub, a hot water container designed to feed the tub, a toilet, bath lavatory, and a septic tank. It was true that the water did not taste good and washing with it rendered clothing any thing but "white as snow," but it was handy and, according to the government men, healthy. After

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<sup>19</sup> *Colony Herald*, 11 June 1936.

<sup>20</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 10-11 June 1936; *Colony Herald*, 11 June 1936; *Commercial Appeal*, 10 June 1936; *Press Scimitar*, 10-11 June 1936. For Eleanor Roosevelt and the delay, see Chapter Three.



all, said Dyess Family Selection Specialist Clark Tucker, the water was simply the same water that all Delta people used. Some women rather doubted that assertion. The water system provided for the government men in the town center reinforced those doubts. Each cottage was wired for the advent of electric lights and an electric pump, waiting only the extension of the power transmission line to the colony. No one could say just when the Colony would get power, but the expectation that the colonists would soon have power was evidenced by the wiring. There were no basements at Dyess but on each of the farms Cone's crews had built a barn and a poultry house. Like the Homesteaders at Tupelo, the RA "... expected each family to have a flock of chickens, a brood sow, and at least one milch cow." The actual construction costs for a three room house with wiring, septic system, plumbing, hen house, barn, and approach bridge was \$1,221.64 (\$18,393 in 2006 dollars); a four room house equipped in the same manner, \$1,365.05 (\$20,551), and a five room house cost \$1,459.92 (\$21,966). <sup>21</sup>

The houses came in three sizes, but avoided monotony by twenty-seven variations on the three themes. Placement of doors, windows, roof styles, and the trim gave individuality to the farm cottages. The furnishings evidenced even more creativity.

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<sup>21</sup>"Construction Plans and Progress," RG 96; Letter to James B. Lawson from Azile Aaron, 1 May 1936, WPA Administration File; F.J. Hemmen, "Detailed Report of Visit to the Dyess Rural Industrial Community Near Osceola, Arkansas Under the Direction of Federal Emergency Relief Administration," RG 96, AK-80 003, hereinafter "Detailed Report." "Interview With a Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor"; "One of Several Interviews With References Concerning Mr. Doe;" both in WPA Administration File. Both the previous references are paraphrased synthesis of actual interviews. RA Family Selection Specialists wrote these Interviews for training the Family Selection personnel for the Dyess project. Hereinafter, "Interview With a Rehabilitation Supervisor" and "One of Several Interviews." The costs above were direct costs and reflected only expenditures on those particular houses. Costs increased during the process, mainly because the Colony was forced to adopt NIRA wage scales. The cost of houses was a point of contention for some.

According to Home Economist Fern Salyers, the furniture and households goods moved by the family were threadbare and the decorative taste of some women was, at least, questionable. One of her biggest challenges, she reported, was in convincing some colony women not to paper their walls with newsprint. The few rugs were filthy and ragged and even when new were garish and unappealing. Most colonists had little furniture; the ERA furnished mattresses at no charge, supplied most with beds and stoves and charged to their accounts. Another detriment to fashionable and comfortable homes was the presence of huge and, most often, abused upright pianos. They were out of tune and "out of key" with interior decorating possibilities, said Salyers. Having a bedstead in the main visiting room was not conducive to modern living, thought Salyers, so she had the Colony shop build models of easily and inexpensively duplicated day beds to double as sitting space during visiting hours and a bed at night. Salyers furnished her own home with theatrical gauze curtains appliquéd with morning glories, simple and easily replicable furniture, and a "congoleum" rug; she used her town-center residence to demonstrate good taste and comfortable living to women with limited budgets.<sup>22</sup>

Even before the influx of new Colonists came in late 1935 and early 1936, the first group of Colonists had provided cultural and spiritual development. When Lawrence Westbrook and Governor Futrell came to Dyess in May of 1936, four different manifestations of Dyess Colony's civic pride honored their presence by demonstrating their skills. A male quartet, a string band, and several soloists entertained the dignitaries

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<sup>22</sup> "Plans and Progress"; *The Colony Herald*, 9 July 1937. Home Economist Fern Salyers lived in House #2, Block No.1 at the Community Center. She paid \$27.00 per month rent for the five-room house. She furnished her house cheaply; for example, dull black plain spool type beds in her house cost \$11.50, "Dyess Colony, Inc, List of Community Center Houses Occupied, and the Renter's Occupation" RG 96.

and the crowd. The four Dyess women's clubs supervised the cafeteria-style supper, proceeds pledged to the Dyess Library Fund. Another dedication preceded the supper; the Dyess Girls' Club presented the funds previously collected for the library. Dyess residents had a high regard for the printed word and seemed to be more informed than their peers, even those on other government projects. According to *The Arkansas Gazette*, a 1937 survey conducted by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of six government projects revealed that Dyess families were twice as likely to subscribe to newspapers as project residents elsewhere.<sup>23</sup>

Building on the solid base established by the people who came in late 1934 and early 1935, the influx of colonists in late 1935 and early 1936 extended and refined the efforts of initial colonists. By 1937, the *Colony Herald* reported on the activities of twelve Dyess Women's Clubs named No 1 through 12; they convened monthly *en masse* in the "Colony Council of Home Demonstration Clubs" and separately once each week. The Home Demonstration Clubs pursued a brisk agenda of cultural and community enrichment aims. Typical, it seems from the recorded proceedings of other Dyess Clubs, was the Wednesday 6 July 1937 meeting of Club No. 10. Mrs. A.L. Holland of 238 Roosevelt Road hosted the twenty-one members attending the regular meeting. In almost classic passive-voice language, the *Colony Herald* reported that . . . "the songs, 'Old Black Joe,' 'Love's Old Sweet Song,' 'School Days,' and 'Love Lifted Me' were sung by all." Mrs. Cecil Wilkins provoked the piety of the assemblage by her account of "how Jesus went about doing good." She made application:

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<sup>23</sup>Henson, "Memories of Dyess;" "Plans and Progress;" "Detailed Report;" *Colony Herald*, 22 May 1936; "Plans and Progress;" "Selection Narrative." *The Arkansas Democrat*, 5 December 1937.

We, too, as his followers can do our share to lighten and brighten the lives of our loved ones, neighbors, and friends . . . now that the revival is over, we should not let its good be forgotten, but strive, each one of us, every day, to carry on its spirit in love and service.<sup>24</sup>

The main order of business for Club No. 10 was the selection of a delegate to attend "the State-wide Home Demonstration Club Rest Camp at Camp Pike." The twenty-one members elected Mrs. A. W. Ledford. The remainder of the meeting devolved into a discussion of the ways and means to meet the club representative's expense. ". . . The group devised a musical program and an old-fashioned box supper on the night of August 2, at the community building." The transactions at Club No. 2 may have been a bit tenser. "Mrs. Clarence Drewery was elected president to succeed Mrs. Earnest Norton, who had resigned." The club did not elect a delegate; Mrs. Almos Overton was appointed to represent the Club at the Rest Camp at Albany. First names of women, it seems, were relevant only for single women – except, of course, for the government men women.<sup>25</sup>

The middle and high school children, led by Miss Katherine Echols, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. R. Echols who moved into No. 74 on 26 October 1934, recruited and directed a Dyess student orchestra. In 1936, she joined the faculty of Dyess Schools after finishing one year at state Normal College, funded by the National Youth Administration. By 1938, according to *The Colony Herald*, the Dyess Girl's and Boy's 4-H Clubs were

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<sup>24</sup> *The Colony Herald*, 9 July 1937. By 1937 the *Colony Herald* was a mimeographed legal sized bi-weekly paper, sometimes reaching 10 pages. The original newspaper was discontinued in late 1936. During its brief existence, the original *Colony Herald* was a highly professional weekly publication. The paper folded after one year, Donald Holley suggests that it may have been too professional.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* Almos Overton was employed at the Colony's lumberyard and lived in town center. He was laid off in 1938 as part of a cost-cutting effort at the Colony.

the largest in the world and the Dyess Clubs often won awards at the State 4-H Club Conventions. The government men had stressed the importance of community spirit during the interviews; the colonists had been assured that there would be ample opportunity for leadership and civic responsibility.<sup>26</sup>

For the first time, medical attention and medicine was available to Colonists as needed. After a \$35.00 per-family-per-year fee, all Dyess people were treated free of charge at the hospital – drugs, physician services, ambulance and operations included – the excess costs born by the colony. By 1937, the Dyess contribution was in excess of \$20,000 per year, and by 1938, the Colony health system had achieved remarkable results compared to other Delta communities. In 1938, there were no deaths among the seventy-five cases of pneumonia reported at the colony as compared to “. . . numerous deaths from this disease in other parts of the same County.”<sup>27</sup> In 1935, the Colony medical staff had been overworked because of the rampant malaria at the Colony. Draining swamps and screened windows were, indeed, proving effective in battling malaria; there were no malaria cases reported in 1938. There were no post-operative deaths at the hospital from the over 100 operations requiring a general anesthesia. The colony’s live birth-rate of 30 per 1,000 exceeded that of Mississippi County’s of 24 per 1,000; the colony’s maternal death rate was 0 percent compared to 4.1 percent for the County. Only one person of 76 cases of dysentery died at Dyess, and that, in the opinion of the medical staff, was solely

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<sup>26</sup> Henson, “Memories of Dyess”; *The Colony Herald*, 9 July 1937; “Detailed Report”; “Selection Narrative”; “Plans and Progress.”

<sup>27</sup> “Dyess Arkansas, Vital Statistics,” type-script narrative and statistical report, 13 August 1938, RG 69, WPA Central Office Records, Roll 1745, Box 339, National Archives II, hereinafter “Dyess Arkansas, Vital Statistics.”

because the family would not allow the child to be hospitalized. According to Dyess physicians J. H. Wilson and Steve F. Turner, "Dyess Colony has the lowest death rate of any community in the U.S.A. per same class of people per thousand." In December 1938, citing excess costs, Floyd Sharp announced that the Colony would not subsidize the hospital after 1 July 1939. He hoped that the Colonists could make other arrangements.<sup>28</sup>

Of equal pride and interest to the Dyess community was the Dyess School system. Conditions during the first school year of 1934/35 were cramped and awkward. The students in grades one through eight attended one of three makeshift schools located over the colony. About half the high-school age students rode a Dyess truck to Wilson, the other half traveled in the same manner to Shawnee. The driver rigged a tarpaulin cover over the bed of a two and a half ton truck in cold or inclement weather. The two school buses purchased for the inspection duty were used to transport students to and from the three temporary Colony schools. By autumn of 1938, Dyess Colony operated three new ward schools and boasted an \$80,000 town-center school for first grade through graduation. Colony schools enrolled 351 students in 1935, including forty-one who attended High School at Shawnee and forty-two enrolled at Wilson. By 1937, fully one-third of Dyess's 3,000 residents were school-aged children; by 1939, Dyess schools enrolled slightly over 1,600 students; and the Colony provided, through the WPA, modern classrooms and employed thirty-seven competent teachers. The RA assigned

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<sup>28</sup> Letter to W. R. Dyess from L.L. Hubener, M. D., 28 June 1935; "Dyess Arkansas, Vital Statistics" both in WPA Central Office Records. Henson, "Memories of Dyess." Minutes: Board of Directors Meeting of Dyess Colony, Inc, 24 May 1937; WPA Administrative File. Dr. Huebner left Dyess for private practice in 1937. Memorandum to all Colony Families, from Floyd Sharp, Dec 3, 1938, WPA Central Office Records.

Educational Specialist J. L. Bond to the Colony to establish the public school system. Bond organized the available records from former schools, instituted a schedule of inoculations, and made sure that student records were maintained in consonance with the state of Arkansas. He did not want graduates of the future Dyess High to be required to take the certification examination required of graduates of unaccredited high schools. Bond informed Dyess in November of 1935 that he was well-pleased with the progress the Colony schools had made and was only concerned with the lack of appropriate facilities. To accommodate the often-near impassible conditions of the new and graveled roads, the Dyess schools opened at 9:00 a.m. and closed at 3:00 p.m. Bond expressed satisfaction with the educational background of the six female teachers. Four of the teachers held L.I. degrees, one a B. A., and one a B. S. E. degree. The teachers, none of whom were married, lived in a town-center residence, a five-room house that rented for \$27.00 per month. At the suggestion of W.R. Dyess, the Colony bore the costs of furnishing the "teacherage." Dyess said that the total living costs for the teachers should average about \$21.00 per month. The Colony paid the Superintendent, Mr. John G. Womack \$125.00 per month. The six women of the teacherage earned \$60.00 per month. They would be comfortable, he said.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Arkansas Gazette*, 9 January 1939. Letter to W. R. Dyess from J. L. Bond, Educational Consultant, Resettlement Administration 15 November 1935, RG 96; "Selection Narrative:" "Plans and Progress." Minutes: Meeting of Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc., 30 March 1936, WPA Administration File. By comparison, the Colony's septic tank foreman also earned \$60.00 per month. Mrs. Alice Perkins, the secretary and stenographer for Fern Salyers, earned \$90.00. The Dyess Schools, after 1938 a part of the Mississippi County Schools, seem to have been among the very best in the state of Arkansas.

Despite the wariness of government men about denominational religious activities, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians sent missionaries to live at Dyess and soon all three particular evangels of God's grace were negotiating with the government men for a spot to build a church. In the meantime, the Methodists' notions having gained foothold first, the disciples of Wesley allowed their neighbors to use their facility. The congregants of one church quickly proved their rural southern Protestant Orthodoxy. Misunderstanding over dispensation of charitable funds raised by the women's group caused some hard feelings and threatened to divide the congregation. The misunderstandings were soon resolved, in part, out of concern for the community's reputation. The religious Colonists did not totally eschew the ecumenicalism strongly preferred by the government men. Representatives of the Moody Bible Institute of Chicago dwelt among the colonists and led community-wide Vacation Bible Schools, pinch-hit for various congregations and, upon leaving for other fields, left the library volumes of piety.<sup>30</sup>

The bosses at Dyess also made provision for men. The United Brotherhood of Dyess Colony organized men "into a social group to discourage dissenters and to encourage those who are not fully resettled." Only with the approval of the United Brotherhood of Dyess Colony could other organizations operate at Dyess. The only such organization to gain approval was the American Farm Bureau. The American Farm Bureau proved remarkably adept in the depression in securing membership dues from

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<sup>30</sup> Dyess Colony, Inc." *The Colony Herald*, 9 July 1937; *The (Memphis) Press Scimitar*, 20, 21 April 1938; *The Press Scimitar*, "Reader Answers Dyess Criticisms – Fault is With Malcontents, Not Administration," by Mrs. Velma Pittman Bullard, 2 May 1938. Dyess Colony, Inc refused to sell land to churches, they would and did however, lease it. See Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors, 13 May 1936, WPA Administrative File.



those whose interests were diametrically opposed to the AFB's vision of agriculture and agricultural labor. The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) did not ask permission.<sup>31</sup>

The government men intended that the small farmers at Dyess have the same advantages as did some of the cotton barons. While the plan for Dyess called for about a third of the acreage to be planted to cotton, the aggregate amount should make Dyess a major cotton producer. The government men assumed that the local production committees organized by the AAA, composed primarily of cotton barons, county agents, and AFB stalwarts, would treat the colonists fairly in assigning acreage allotments. The assumptions proved totally without foundation. Floyd Sharp and Lawrence Westbrook had to appeal to Washington in order to obtain a more reasonable cotton allotment from the AAA. The local production committee allowed one Colonist less than an acre for the crop year 1938. There were certain advantages that could be accrued to individuals only based on cooperation. The cooperative association mandated that Colonists plant the Colony approved hybrid cottonseed variety and restricted the colony gin to processing only that specific strain of cotton. Cooperation would allow the Colonists to command the same prices as the best of the cotton barons. The ability to sell a "pure" cottonseed and to market a uniform long-staple cotton crop required some investment from the Colonists. They must join and be ruled by the Producer's Cooperative. They were told,

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<sup>31</sup> "Dyess Colony, Inc." Letter to Lawrence Westbrook from H.L. Mitchell, Executive Secretary Southern Tenant Farmers Union, 30 March 1938, "WPA Central Office Files" RG 96.

just as they were when farming cotton on halves, what to grow. Soon Mr. Jake Terry, the Farm Manager, would be more direct, specific, and insistent in his instructions.<sup>32</sup>

The initial economic advantages of the colony compared to the sharecropping system from which most of the colonists had escaped were stunning. Each family had access to three separate credit accounts. Every month each colony family prepared a family budget for necessities but also included such "extras" as clothing, school supplies, and the poll tax assessed by the state of Arkansas. The colony social worker and family specialists approved the budget and the head of the family was assigned enough hours on the colony's workforce, at standard relief work wages of thirty cents per hour, to fund about half the monthly budgetary requirements. The other half was disbursed, until 1935, in the form of coupon books, redeemable at the colony store. With the infusion of RA personnel at Dyess, the furnish system was changed to a cash basis. Twice a month the man received a check for his labor; twice a month the family received a check from the colony for one-half of the remaining budget. The amounts were charged to the "Regular Furnish Account." In the spring of 1936, T. Harry Reid, Director of Region VI of the RA (formerly of the Arkansas Extension Service), informed Lawrence Westbrook that the Colonists should no longer depend on wage work. The construction phase was over and the Colonists should devote all their time to farming. The government men at Dyess proved to be reasonable to settlers in paying off their previous debts to the government, they even allowed colonists to adjust the terms for payment on their "Capital Goods

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<sup>32</sup> "Plans and Progress"; "Dyess Colony, Inc."; letter to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, 29 April 1938; letter to H. C. Barker from E. S. Dudley, 3 May 1938; all in RG 69, WPA Central Office Files. Letter to C.C. Randall, State Allotment Board, AAA, from Floyd Sharp, 1 September 1937, WPA Administration File.

Accounts” (see below), but they were insistent that the furnish account, including the poll tax, be fully settled in December of each year. Insist they did, but most often Colonists at Dyess carried small furnish balances over year-to-year. The insistence upon paying the furnish account is significant in view of president of the American Farm Bureau Eugene O’Neal’s fraudulent claim that the WPA and FSA paid poll taxes for over 6,000 rural relief recipients in order to build a political machine. At the same time that O’Neal made his outrageous claims evidence existed that the AFB had over 13,000 black sharecroppers in six Mississippi counties paying dues to his organization. The AFB claimed to croppers that the AAA payments came by virtue of the AFB and provided on-the-spot check cashing facilities so that the croppers could conveniently pay their annual American Farm Bureau dues. A large banner festooned the walls of the Clarksdale, Mississippi AAA office, “Pay your AFB Dues Here.”<sup>33</sup>

Since all the colonists were RRC clients, most of them brought previous balances on their RRC loans. These amounts, transferred to Dyess Colony and debited to “RRC Account,” after 1935, were designated “Deferred Balances.” The designation is interesting because it allowed the resolution of previous debts to be delayed until the Colonists had shown sufficient economic progress to amortize it. The uncertainty about the “Deferred Balances” combined with what some colonists thought was deliberately

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<sup>33</sup> “Dyess Colony Incorporated, Rural Loan Receivables, Schedule C, 1936-1939;” letter to Lawrence Westbrook from T. Harry Reid, both in RG 96. Letter to Robert F. LaFollette, from John A. Boutwell, Chairman, Agricultural Committee of the Mississippi House of Representatives, 9 February 1942, Gardner Jackson Papers, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York. Historian Lawrence J. Nelson sees no wrong in the AFB’s exploitation. He approvingly cites Oscar Johnston’s view that his sharecroppers wanted to be members of the AFB – that they looked forward to getting their Farm Bureau paper. Lawrence J. Nelson, *King Cotton’s Advocate: Oscar G. Johnston and the New Deal*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999), 114-115.

confusing and fluid conditions for ownership was to be a prime reason for the growing disaffection among some.

If a man needed a mule, or a bigger one, (one client was affirmed in his suspicions that his two 800 pound mules would not be able to handle the Delta buckshot) or a plow he had only to gain the approval of the Farm Manager. Armed with the sequentially numbered and multi-copied blank, the Colonists could draw on the warehouse or mule lot for his capital needs. Thus, the charges appeared in the colonist's name as "Capital Goods Account." Again, the amortization of this account would be discussed in the future, after certain conditions were met. In the meantime, the account accrued annual interest charges of 5 percent, a dramatic reduction from the cotton-baron furnish system.<sup>34</sup>

The government men – teachers, nurses, drag line operators, bookkeepers, farm supervisors, porters, police, commissary manager, colony physician, clerks, drivers, foremen, Family Counselor (the post-May 1936, title of the Senior Family Selection Specialist), the management staff, and assorted other employees lived in the town-center residences. The residences, the community building, and other structures had electrical service and water system that delivered cold and clear water from an artesian well. The town-center well water was sweet and devoid of the iron deposits that saturated the farm cottage wells. Potential colonists were advised to make sure they sampled the water at one of the farms because the water in the town's artesian well was not the same as the water from farm cottage wells. The town center water system cost \$26,810.60; it would have cost \$215.60 to equip each farm with an electric pump, including the cost of the

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<sup>34</sup>“One of Several Interviews,” RG 96.

intra-colony power transmission lines. The sixteen blocks – thirty-two residences – of the town-center were of the same design and construction as the farm cottages, with one exception. There were no outbuildings on the lots in town center. None of the Dyess colony houses had basements, and less than 1% had fireplaces. The people, said Cone Murphy, always bricked up the fireplaces and installed a wood stove. The five room houses rented for \$27.00 a month; the four room houses for \$22.00 and the three room houses for \$17.00. Thirty-two Dyess employees (thirty-seven if one counts all the occupants of the teacherage) of the 114 employed as of May 1936, rented residences at Dyess. The mixture of occupational and income levels represented at Dyess is a reminder of a time when class distinctions were not so vividly manifested as later. In Block No.21, resided the highest salaried official at Dyess, Dr. L.L. Hubener drew \$525 per month; Resident Manager E. S. Dudley earned \$325 and lived adjacent to a Commissary Clerk who earned \$100 per month, the Disbursing Officer received \$200 per month, and a Landscaper, salary not specified.<sup>35</sup>

The colony newspaper monitored the pulse of the club and school activities and accomplishments; locals formed bands and individuals pulled out fiddles and guitars or gathered around one of the beat-up upright pianos and blended Protestant hymnody with country and Delta blues. The school questionnaire surveyed each child about his or her musical ability or interest in acquiring it. Perhaps Ray Cash's boy, Johnny, owed part of

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<sup>35</sup>“Dyess Colony, Inc, List of Community Center Houses Occupied, and the Renter's Occupation;” “Dyess Colony, Inc;” both in RG 96.”Administrative Personnel” typescript roster of names and salaries in RG 69, WPA Central Office Records, Roll 1745. “Dyess Colony, Inc., Budgets.” The list referenced above does not list the name of the landscaper, but it does include the salaries of other workers, presumably of same skill level. Workmen's' wages ranged from \$60.00 to \$125.00 per month.

his future legendary success to the musical incubator that was Dyess. Families, especially those from non-Delta areas, gloried in the size of the vegetables and melons that sprouted from the black Delta buckshot ground. It took a while for some of the Delta natives to match their plains and hill-country brethren in vegetable gardening. However, many of the Delta natives had difficulty cultivating vegetables – most of them had little experience. One of the oft-repeated clichés about planters and croppers, found in the works of such writers as Jonathan Daniels and David Cohn, concerns planters' provision of garden plots and seeds for cropper maintenance. Cohn even relates that Delta cotton barons encouraged their croppers to raise pigs and chickens, but his exceptions proved the rule. Delta cotton barons of the 1920s and 30s, particularly in the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta, did not encourage and in most cases did not even allow croppers to raise their food. The land was too valuable; most Delta cotton barons insisted that croppers grow cotton to the cabin door. Only after the AAA acreage reduction and under the soil conservation program did planters allow significant space for cropper gardens. The American Red Cross supplied vegetable seeds to croppers after the 1927 flood. The results were disappointing. Red Cross officials discovered that a great many Delta residents, tillers of the richest soil in the world, did not know how to grow vegetables. Indeed, after the 1927 flood, Oscar Johnston hired two Alcorn A & M graduates to teach his sharecroppers how to cultivate and process fruit and vegetables.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> "One of Several Interviews"; "Dyess Colony, Inc."; "Plans and Progress." For references to club, school activities, and music, see *The Colony Herald* July 1937 – October 1938. Sara E. Morris, Paper "Underwear, Quilts, Vegetables, and Milk: Mississippi Home Demonstration Work During the Great 1927 Flood," SAWH Seventh Conference on Women's History, Baltimore Maryland, June 8-10, 2006. David L. Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1935), 135. References to the South, the Delta in particular, importing food (corn was imported not

Spurred on by Home Demonstration Clubs, the Colony sponsored contests judging or simply rhapsodizing about, the fruits and vegetables produced by kitchen gardens; twice a year the Colony conducted a "Yard Beautiful" contest. Many of the Dyess residents had moved from the hills and plains areas of Arkansas. They were accustomed to sweeping their bare yards, a physical impossibility in the Delta. Dyess Colony yards were composed of buckshot; mud when it rained and deep-gashed crevices when it did not. The answer to the dilemma, discomfiting and yet beneficial to some non-Deltans, was to plant grass seed. Not only did the grass moderate the mud and cracked ground, it also provided a proper foundation for poultry. The Farm Supervisors estimated that each family would need about 300 chickens in order to achieve a population of thirty good laying hens. Throughout his association with the Colony Lawrence Westbrook promoted egg production for the St. Louis and Memphis markets. Chickens could not survive out of doors on bare buckshot land. The Deltans among the Dyess colonists were not overwrought by the stiff soil or the mud or snakes, or wild animals. A nine-year old Dyess boy found a baby bobcat in the woods with its eyes still closed during the very week that the Governor and Lawrence Westbrook came to memorialize W. R. Dyess and to dedicate the project. The lad intended to raise it for a pet, he said.<sup>37</sup>

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only as animal feed – it also constituted a major portion of croppers' diets) are ubiquitous. Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers*, 91. Johnny Cash was four years old when his family moved to Dyess, 24 March 1935 – house #266. See: Henson, "Memories of Dyess" and "Dyess Colony 1934, Sorted by Name." F. J. Hurst, "Mississippi's Largest Cotton Plantation," *Progressive Farmer* (5), (February 1940): 3, 8.

<sup>37</sup> *The Colony Herald*, 9 July 1937. *The Colony Herald* July 1937 – October 1938. "One of Several Interviews"; "Dyess Colony, Inc."; "Plans and Progress."

The economic condition and standard of living for Dyess residents was, by middle-class American standards of the time, woefully deficient. Despite the pristine white houses and arrow-straight graveled roads, the houses at Dyess were built cheaply of local lumber not properly seasoned. Cheaply constructed houses made of improperly processed materials require intense maintenance in order to remain neat and attractive. Dyess Colony homes did not remain pristine or attractive for very long. However, compared to conditions they had experienced in the American South that were worse than anywhere else in the world, some colonists reveled in the roofs that did not leak, water just outside the kitchen door, a good school and teachers for their children, and confident of a decent supper. Many of the Dyess colonists had lived in such substandard conditions all their lives, but many had not. For some of the colonists the conditions at Dyess were best measured not against the immediate past but against their lives before the boll weevil, prior to the crash of cotton prices, prevenient to the ministrations of the New Deal. Some colonists still believed that they had a right to pursue the American dream. Some had much greater aspirations than a life of secure but blighted subsistence competence. Some, like some of those at Tupelo, did not have a problem with authority as such; they just did not like people telling them what to do.<sup>38</sup>

### The Third Crisis

“Down in Tupelo everybody seems to be feeling grand,” reported Lorena Hickock to Harry Hopkins; people were buying electrical appliances in anticipation of cheap TVA

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<sup>38</sup> Letter to Clarence Senior from Naomi Mitchinson, Labor File, STFU (1935-1938), box 443, Socialist Party of America Papers, special Collections, Duke University. The houses at Tupelo Homesteads, built by local building supply and construction firm were of far better materials and construction than the cottages at Dyess, although they shared architectural features.



power, and she approved of the economic plan designed for the Tupelo Homesteaders. The homesteaders were simply replicating the wage-work/subsistence gardening traditionally practiced by most of Tupelo's workers. They had a chance, said Hickock, to "pay out." On the surface, things were looking grand at Dyess; how people felt was much more complicated.<sup>39</sup>

There was always some sort of trouble at Dyess. Some Dyess colonists were anxious when they discovered that their move to Dyess, often a great sacrifice in abandoned memories and family, did not mean that they were secure. They were on probation, an inconsequential matter it seemed. Serious consideration of their probationary status came only with the dismissal of some of their neighbors. Even if one agreed that a particular family was not a wholesome influence or good neighbor, the fact that someone could be evicted for exercising a personal preference rather than for violation of a law or regulation was sobering. Mr. S. B. Funk believed that the price of his farm was far too high and totally unjustified and refused to sign the purchase agreement; his eviction brought protest from here-to-fore cooperative citizens. In 1938, a non-colonist neighbor, Mr. Paul Finch, demanded that all the officers and members of the Board of Directors resign or else he would inform newspapers in Memphis, Chicago, Kansas City, Cleveland, and St. Louis of the gross fraud and outrageous exploitation inflicted upon the colonists at Dyess in particular and upon the taxpayers of the United States in general. Mr. Funk and Mr. Finch were rousing up the colonists. More than 100 colonists supported Finch's notions and petitioned President Roosevelt to conduct an investigation of the Colony. Eleanor Roosevelt directed similar complaints to the bosses

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<sup>39</sup> Letter from Lorena Hickock to Harry L. Hopkins, esq., 11 June 1934, Harry L. Hopkins Papers, FDR Library. Morris, "Underwear, Quilts, and Vegetables."

at the RA and at Dyess. The farms cost too much. The government men demanded \$90.00 per acre for land that the government bought at \$2.50. The government men said that the purchase price would not be more than the actual cost – and they offered the government men’s own words as proof. Why could a colonist not plant whatever variety of cotton that struck his fancy? Why was an American cotton cultivator not free to gin his own cotton where he pleased? Why was the independent land-holding cotton “farmer” of Dyess dependent on government men and bosses for marketing the crop? Why could a man who had obligated himself to a lifetime of mortgage payments not get a traditional fee-simple occupancy? The government men had a rational answer to each of those questions. There is no evidence that the bosses actually responded with the obvious (to the bosses) answer, “Because you have proven to be incompetent.” In every case, said the bosses, the colonists had agreed to the conditions, or extenuating circumstances had required alteration of the original language. Within a year after the dedication ceremony, the number of people leaving Dyess became a steady stream – they were not as steadily replaced.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Letter to Dear Floyd from Lawrence Westbrook, 29 April 1939; to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, 24 April, 1939; to Eleanor Roosevelt from W. M. Johnson (Dyess, AR) 12 February 1939; from Mrs. Malvina C. Thompson, Secretary to Mrs. Roosevelt to My Dear Colonel Westbrook, 21 February 1939; from Lawrence Westbrook to Mrs. Calvin C. Murphy, 2 March 1939; all in RG 69 WPA Central Office Records. “Dyess Colony, Inc. – Attitude Toward Project”; Memorandum to all Residents of the Dyess Colony, from Arkansas Works Progress Administration (signed) Floyd Sharp, State Administrator, 10 February 1936; Inter-Office Memorandum from Mrs. Azile Aaron, Family Selection Specialist to Mr. J. B. Lawson, Regional Representative, Management Division, 8 November 1935; Letter to Floyd Sharp from Paul Finch, 10 May 1938; “Interview with a Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor”; “One of several interviews”; “Procedure Followed”; “Memories of Dyess”; all in RG 96, Box 182. Lawrence Westbrook, “Operating Principles at Dyess,” hand annotate typescript of a speech delivered at the Colony on 22 May 1936, RG 96, AK – 80. *The Colony Herald*, 1 May

Some colonists claimed that the farm managers used abusive language and physical intimidation. Dyess officials, among themselves, discussed the truculent personality of some personnel, the greed of others, and argued about what to do with those people who would obviously never be able to support themselves. Westbrook suggested that around 200 families would never be self-sufficient and that the Colony should plan to provide welfare to them until, perhaps, their children could assume care for them. Many of the colonists refused to cooperate. The governor and state house crowd made Dyess a principal target and the AFB tried to wreck any government assistance to the most destitute Americans. Over 100 Dyess men signed a petition condemning the government men at Dyess and demanded alterations to the system. At the same time, a significant majority of Dyess colonists petitioned the First Lady and asked her to ignore the grouching of a few malcontents. Meanwhile, Rexford G. Tugwell continued to draw the vicious lashings of the increasingly suspicious and resentful Southern Democrats; Dyess Colony was guilty by association.<sup>41</sup>

Clearly, the reality of Dyess was very different from the vision of W. R. Dyess, and the hopes, if not the expectations, of New Deal planners. The "Third Crisis," was inevitable considering the number of contradictory phenomena set at play against each other at Dyess. With a full stomach, a snug and comfortable house, furnish provided and free of the mind-numbing anxiety of destitution, the Dyess cultivator might well have

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1936; *Arkansas Gazette*, 9 January 1938, 10 June 1977. Letter to Floyd Sharp from Paul Finch, 10 May 1938, WPA Central Office Files.

<sup>41</sup>Letter to Lawrence Westbrook, 29 April 1938; letter to Floyd Sharp from Lawrence Westbrook, 11 May 1938; both in WPA Central Office Files. Bernard Sterschner, *Rexford Tugwell and the New Deal*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 238-250.

reason to reflect and to re-examine his present condition and future obligations. Was his present state that different from his former?

Before a Dyess colonist had failed dramatically enough to become a client of the Arkansas Rural Rehabilitation Corporation, his residence status was tenuous at best. He had no guarantee that he could cultivate the same ground the next crop season. New arrivals at Dyess could rely on the goodwill of the bosses; they were on probation for at least a year and could be dismissed if they failed to meet expectations. The new arrival had no guarantee that he could cultivate the same ground the next crop season; his residence status was tenuous. On the landlord's place the cultivator had to tolerate the rude and sometimes demeaning behavior of the boss. At Dyess, one only had to avoid Farm Manager Jake Terry's acerbic tongue and physical threats. Before Dyess, the Arkansas cultivator had little discretion over the acreage he could crop. The amount depended on the opinion of the boss as to the likely efficiency of his labor force. At Dyess, the bosses determined the size of his farm and his house, based on the size and likely efficiency of his labor force.

A southern sharecropper planted the seeds that his landlord provided. The cooperative agreement at Dyess required the colonist to plant the seed the bosses sold him. Sharecroppers did not choose where or by whom to "gin" cotton; the cotton barons did that. The Dyess colonist had no say over the ginning of cotton; the Cooperative Association did that. The fortunes and conditions of the typical Delta sharecropper were determined by the landlord, the paternalistic, but mostly well-meaning, cotton-baron that financed the crop and owned the land. At least at Dyess, that most "progressive" of all the New Deal agrarian programs, the Colonist understood that he was a free citizen of the

United States and, therefore, entitled to self-governance and representation. America was a democracy. At Dyess, a triumvirate of government men freed the cultivators from all the negotiations, all the arrangements, all the travel, entertainment, influence, and power that traditionally had been the exclusive domain of cotton barons in the cotton business.

The trio of Arkansas WPA officials, dominated by Floyd Sharp controlled the lives and fortunes of the Dyess Colonists more completely than ever did a cotton baron. Most Delta sharecroppers owed the landlord at the end of the year. Many of them carried debts that they did not understand and seemed impossible to repay; every year the balances got bigger. At Dyess, all the cultivators were in debt. They had great difficulty determining just how much they owed; it soon seemed that most of them could never "pay out." Every year the balances got bigger. On a cotton baron's plantation the crop was, most often, pledged by a crop-lien; at Dyess, it was pledged by a contract. Much to the chagrin of social commentators and agricultural experts, sharecroppers had a disturbing propensity to move when their debts piled up. Strangely, some also moved when they happened to do well during a particular year. It was one of the few tools of the peasant class. At Dyess when consciousness of mounting debt intruded some Colonists moved. Sometimes, just to prove that they could, some of the cultivators at Dyess cast the only meaningful vote at their disposal – they voted with their feet and left Dyess. A Dyess colonist lived a better life than did the typical Delta cropper; but they still moved. In May 1936, there were 484 families at Dyess; by April 1938, 184 (40%) had moved. During the period October 1934 to April 1938, 649 families had lived at Dyess, of this number 252 (39%) had moved. Unlike a good number of white sharecroppers and unlike all of the blacks, the Dyess Cooperator could and did vote. He did not remotely

resemble, however, the vision of W. R. Dyess, nor that of Thomas Jefferson's yeoman. He looked more like a traditional cotton cultivator, a southern sharecropper, than he did a virtuous American yeoman.<sup>42</sup>

Floyd Sharp had managed to become, arguably, one of the most powerful cotton barons in the South. Despite the published intentions of creating a community of land owning, cooperating, and yet self-directed, modestly comfortable farmers, Floyd Sharp was mindful of the demonstrated inability of Dyess clients to achieve that status on their own. In order to rehabilitate the impoverished and apparently hopeless cultivators, Sharp was reconciled to the fact that Dyess farmers needed direction and they must be controlled for their own good. Therefore, Sharp, as the state Director managed to control both the operations and personnel of the Arkansas Works Progress Administration and the largest of all the New Deal agrarian projects. Floyd Sharp with the concurrence of two state WPA Board Members, R.C. Limerick and H.C. Baker, exercised control over his cut of the New Deal more than any other New Deal official, whether elected or appointed. Dyess Colony, because of Sharp's alteration of its original plan by virtue of

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<sup>42</sup> For problems concerning Mr. Jake Terry see: Letter to President Roosevelt from Homer Donaldson 31 May 1938; to Westbrook from Sharp, 29 April 1938; to Sharp from Westbrook 11 May 1938, and others in this series, RG 96 WPA Central Office Records. See also: Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc, 13 May 1936. "Lease"; Minutes: of Meeting of Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc., 24 May 1937, "Resolution," both in WPA Administration File. Both the agreement that Colonists executed on coming to Dyess and the purchase agreement executed upon completion of the probationary period specifically bound the colonists to supervision and direction, "... said party of the second part shall . . . use said property in accordance with such rules and regulations under the supervision of the agents of said Rural Rehabilitation Division of the Emergency Relief Administration of Arkansas and/or the agents and employees of the first party," RG 96. Charles P. Loomis and Dwight Davidson, Jr., "Sociometrics and the Study of New Rural Communities, *Sociometrics* (2), (1) (Jan 1939): 56-67.

the corporation, was not under the direction of the ERA, the WPA, RA, or the Farm Security Administration (FSA), established in 1937. Floyd Sharp was an employee of and subordinate to the WPA and subject to its policies and supervision. However, since the Dyess Colony was a separate corporate entity, its affairs were subject to the direction of the Board of Directors, not to the WPA. Until the FSA absorbed the colony, Floyd Sharp controlled the economy and lives of his clients and employees more authoritatively and completely than did Harry Hopkins, or Rexford Tugwell, or Senator Joe Robinson, or the President of the United States.<sup>43</sup>

Aware of the traditional American fear and suspicion of collectivization and Americans' propensity to confuse it with cooperation, the Dyess agreement seemed to have provided for democratic voice and cropper control. The small farmers at Dyess could only prosper and compete if they could avail themselves of the advantages accruing to the cotton barons. Only by pooling the crop and resources of individuals could the Dyess community achieve the goal of providing a modest and secure competence for its members. How could the interests and small inputs of a diverse group of stubbornly independent and indebted Arkansas cultivators be channeled into a significant and effective participant in American agriculture to the benefit of individuals? The answer, it appeared, was the cooperative. However, did not cooperation violate long-held American traditions of self-reliance and determination? The answer to the dilemma, said the Dyess

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<sup>43</sup> Minutes: Meeting of the Board of Directors, Dyess Colony, Incorporated, 30 November 1936; "Lease of Real Estate": WPA Administration Files. The board of directors at this meeting agreed to accept responsibility as Liquidating Agent for the Arkansas ERA. Of the \$872, 917.13, Dyess Colony was awarded \$731,291.76. The Colony's finance department was responsible to disburse the remaining funds to General Relief (\$31,272.43), Hot Springs Transient Camp (\$100,000), State Public Welfare Commission (\$6,107.54), Relief Research (\$3,860.96), and Women's Camp (584.44.)

Board of Directors, was in the creation of Producers' Cooperatives. The Producers' Cooperative at Dyess would unify the demands and assets of Dyess cotton cultivators, thus, gaining advantages normally the purview of cotton barons. The creation of a cooperative did not violate American notions of Democracy, said the bosses. The Directors of the Cooperative had control of all business decisions. The Board of the Cooperative would determine the particular pure strain of hybrid cotton planted at Dyess. The Board would negotiate with Delta and Pine Land (DP&L) or the Delta Experiment Station or the University of Arkansas Cotton Branch Experiment Station at Marion for use of one of the newly biologically engineered strains of cottonseed. The Board determined who could use the Colony gin. Since only those who planted the approved cottonseed could use the gin, all the cottonseed extracted from the ginning process was sold, not for its oil, or as feed for livestock, but as a single pure seed variety and thus demanded as much as a 60% premium over standard cottonseed. By planting only the long-staple varieties perfected by the scientists at the Delta Experiment Station or at the laboratories of DP&L, Dyess cotton brought premium prices. The Board of Directors also undertook the onerous task of negotiating with the various cotton-factors and marketing associations that lusted for their business. Stapleton Cotton headquartered in Greenwood, Mississippi competed with The O'Donnell Brothers headquartered in Boston, New Orleans, Phoenix, Memphis, Atlanta, London, and Paris to market the Colony's cotton. The board also enforced the policies of the Colony with regard to progress in clearing land, attitude toward cooperation, assumption of minimal standards of living, and adherence to community standards. The Producer's Cooperative wielded enormous, almost dictatorial power. No matter said the government men, the Board of



Directors would be chosen from the Cooperative Membership. The Dyess farmers would choose their own bosses; it was democracy at its best, they said.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps not. The specter of ill-prepared, immoderate, and ill-mannered Arkansas farmers dealing with professional emissaries representing Oscar Johnston and LeRoy Percy, and other cotton barons was more than Floyd Sharp could tolerate. After securing the administrative control of Dyess via the creation of Dyess Colony Incorporated, shortly after the death of W. R. Dyess, Sharp immediately began to plan a way around the democratic realities of an incorporated Cooperative Association. The Delaware Incorporation statutes worked well for the creation of Dyess Colony. Control of the colony was concentrated in the Board of Directors, a group dominated by Sharp. However, the Delaware statutes concerning cooperatives were problematic. Under Delaware laws, a chartered cooperative required that the Board of Directors be elected from the general membership of the association. That feature made the incorporation of Cooperatives under Delaware statutes unacceptable to Floyd Sharp. The Arkansas laws provided a loophole. Dr. H. M. Colvin of the WPA Washington staff advised Sharp that

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<sup>44</sup> Letters from O'Donnell Bros. Cotton Brokers and Merchants to Colonel Lawrence Westbrook, 27 April, 1 March, 17 May, and 12 August 1939 in WPA Central Office Records. Letter from Staple Cotton Cooperative Association: letters from Mr. H. E. Patton, Secretary-Manager of the Staple Cotton Discount Corporation, Greenwood, MS to Floyd Sharp, 25 August 1939; H. C. Baker to H. E. Patton, 27 August 1937; Patton to Westbrook, 29 March 1937; letter from Charles G. Henry, General Manager Mid-South Cotton Growers Association, Memphis, to H. C. Baker, 28 July 1939; letter from Claude Byrd, Cotton Branch Experiment Station to H. C. Baker, 2 November 1937; from Baker to Byrd, 25 October 1937, all in WPA Administrative File. Among the founders and Directors of the Staple Cotton Cooperative Association were LeRoy Percy and Oscar Johnston. "Dyess Colony Cooperative Association: Member's Standard Contract"; "Code of By-Laws of Dyess Colony Cooperative Association"; both in WPA Central Office Records.

certain provisions in the Arkansas statutes allowed the Board of Directors of Dyess Colony Incorporated to continue directing the affairs of the Colonists.

The feeling that it was necessary to secure a Delaware Charter was probably due to the fact that it was thought that the Dyess Colony Incorporated which will lease its property to the cooperative association to be formed would not have proper influence or control over the association's Board of Directors. However, the Dyess Colony Incorporated can have very effective control over the Board of Directors and the affairs of the cooperative association under Arkansas statutes. <sup>45</sup>

Eventually the attempt to retain control of the people of Dyess resulted in the disintegration of the noble experiment.

Sharp tried gradually to include the colonists in the leadership of the Cooperative Association. The activities of the Colony eventually at the end of about four years would be managed by Cooperative Associations. By then the financially sound infrastructure of Dyess would be an example of a planned democracy. Sharp hoped to dole out authority and responsibility to the Colonists as their actions justified it. Ostensibly a Board of Directors governed both of the Cooperative Associations; one was a producer's co-op, the other a co-op operating the store and non-profit centers. However, by using board seats reserved for the Dyess Board and for the University of Arkansas and the management contract held by the Dyess Colony, Inc. Board, all decisions rested ultimately in the hands of Floyd Sharp. Resident Manager E.S. Dudley helped the cooperative board select a committee to meet with the appropriate manager in order to investigate the affairs and make recommendations for various colony activities. Thus, some Colonists held the impressive sounding title of Member of the Board of Directors of the Dyess Colony Cooperative Association; others assumed advisory positions related to

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<sup>45</sup>Memorandum to Colonel Westbrook from H.M. Colvin, 8 May 1936, RG 69, WPA Central Office Files.

specific activities. The degree of dissatisfaction and irritation among the Colonists was often demonstrated by the petty recommendations and demands of the committees. The advisory committee complained to the store manager about dogs running free in the store and the "crabbiness" of one of the female clerks. Other debates concerned whether or not to place benches on the store porch. At one such advisory committee meeting, the committee's recommendations astounded Dudley. First, wrote Dudley to Sharp, they demanded a guaranteed price for any truck crops marketed through the association. Second, they asked for funds to give to Mr. S.B. Funk in connection with his eviction suit and to aid Mr. Finch in his investigation of Dyess.<sup>46</sup>

By the summer of 1937 and continuing until the dissolution of the colony, the grievances, imagined or real, became part of growing public disaffection with Dyess Colony. Much of the general disdain or suspicion applied to the Colony was a function of the ridicule directed at Rexford G. Tugwell by the conservative press, the AAA, and the agricultural establishment. However, much of it had simmered since the inception of Colonization Project No. 1. Azile Aaron, Family Selection Specialist at the newly created Resettlement Administration in Washington and recently charged, by Rexford Tugwell, with overall management of the family selection at Dyess, made a research trip to Dyess in the fall of 1935. Based on the information gleaned from interviews with colonists, Rural Rehabilitation officials, and other government men, Aaron redesigned

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<sup>46</sup> Letter from Floyd Sharp to Lawrence Westbrook, 12 July 1938, WPA Central Office Records.

the blanks and the procedures; she also instituted a comprehensive training component for the family selection personnel, particularly the Regional Interviewers.<sup>47</sup>

The principal complaint from the colonists, even the most cooperative ones, was the one-year probationary period and the inability to know what they were to pay for their new farms. Colonists discovered that the blanks they signed at Dyess did not actually guarantee anything. The contract required a Colonist to cooperate, satisfy standard community obligations, and make reasonable progress during the first year of occupancy. Upon satisfactory completion of those requirements, the Colonist would be offered an opportunity to enter into an agreement to buy the farm at a price, at an interest rate, and for a period of years to be determined later. One of the most universally recognized deleterious properties of the American sharecropping system affected Dyess Colonists. Tenants who had no permanent interest in a property had no reason to invest time or money to improve or even maintain land and structures. The Dyess Colonists, presumably, had reason to trust their new bosses and the government. Aaron and her associates discovered that, in spite of the stated nature of the experiment, some of the first colonists came to Dyess looking for a chance to escape farming for a living. They were not committed to farming as a way of life, nor did some of them show much interest in becoming part of a community. Some had great difficulty in understanding how cooperation, which meant sacrificing personal initiative and preference, could benefit them. Some of the initial colonists were shocked and woefully unprepared for the

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<sup>47</sup> "Procedures Followed"; Holt, "An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used."

peculiar nature of life and farming in the Delta. Based on the experience of the colonists and the RRC, Aaron set about improving the selection of colonist families.<sup>48</sup>

Several of the documents that Aaron's staff prepared for training family selection personnel are particularly revealing. The Washington RA office created training documents based on the existing interviews and cases of current Dyess residents who had been selected by the Arkansas RRC. Using actual questions and objections, the documents reconstructed past interviews and supplied appropriate answers. These documents are interesting for at least two reasons. All of the issues, which later were the subject of so much agitation, were articulated and addressed in the training documents. Neither the RA nor the bosses at Dyess were unaware of the problems that confronted some of the Colonists. At least after December 1935, all the government men had read the documents and had been coached as how to answer those questions. The second reason the documents are so important is that their existence proves that the colonists should have been aware of the peculiar nature of life at Dyess.<sup>49</sup>

The synthetic interview with questions was drawn from actual interviews and answers supplied for training purposes addressed the nature of the occupancy. The one-year probationary period was for the benefit of the applicant as well as the colony, said the model interviewer. The one-year trial allowed the applicant to leave before obligating himself to pay for the farm. The reason the government men could not specify the price was that no one knew, exactly, what the final price of the project would be because

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<sup>48</sup> "Dyess Colony, Inc, Aaron Report"; RG 96.

<sup>49</sup> "One of Several Interviews"; "Interview With a Rural Rehabilitation Supervisor"; both in RG 96.

construction was still ongoing. Colonists did not get a deed with their amortization schedule and contract because the government was obligated to protect its investment. Thus, the colonists would get title when the farms were paid for.<sup>50</sup>

The potential colonists came to the interviews with questions apparently based on rumors. Selection personnel hastened to assure that the Colony did not use bells to summon people to the fields and that Colonists were not required to get permission to leave the property. Some had concerns about having visitors, others asked about the mud and the quality of water. In their answers, the interviews offered straightforward answers along with a moderate commentary. For example, in assuring that Colonists could leave the property at will, staffers also commented on the necessity of applying close attention to the crops if one was to be successful. Relatives and friends could visit at the discretion of the Colonist, interviewers assured potential Colonists, but one should be considerate of the sensibilities of neighbors. The houses were not large enough for extended families or numerous visitors. Extended stays by large numbers of people could easily inconvenience Colony neighbors. The questions asked by the colonists in early 1936 did not come as a surprise to the government men – they had ready, and for the most part, truthful answers. That some of the assertions made by the interviewers turned out to be less than accurate is certain. Twenty acres of Delta land was not sufficient to produce food, feed, and cash enough to amortize the loan and provide a wholesome living. The property turned out to be not as safe from flooding as the interviews said. Even so, the

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<sup>50</sup> "Dyess Colony, Inc., Aaron Report." "One of Several Interviews." This paragraph is a reconstruction of the dialogue of the interviews. The questions and responses to them are taken from the sample interview prepared by the RA Washington staff. The information, as offered in the above, does concur with the actual renter's agreement, the agreement to purchase, and the Dyess Colony Cooperative Association, in WPA Administration File.

interviews and the training materials they used were not deliberately misleading. Any errors or misrepresentations were honest errors. Every Dyess Family Placement Specialist had been trained by use of the synthetic interviews. Later some colonists claimed that they were ignorant of the items discussed in the training materials.<sup>51</sup>

“Dyess Colony, Inc,” is an in-house narrative and summary of conditions at Dyess covering its inception through 1937. It is anonymous, and it is a non-published typescript, yet it contains direct quotations from several reports of RA officials, it seems to have been created for internal use only as an objective summary, and not as an attempt to justify or defend the Colony. Therefore, it seems to be a trustworthy source. The narrative was glowing in its report on the character, training, and attitude of the Regional Interviewers and Family Selection Specialists. All were college graduates; all had received some post-graduate training; all were Arkansas natives. They had compassion for the potential clients and were passionate about the promise of Dyess. Most of them were from rural backgrounds and all demonstrated skill in driving the muddy and rutted roads of rural Arkansas. All had faced situations that made an automobile useless and all had reverted to riding a mule or horse to an interview, or hiking through the Arkansas wilderness of mud and swamps in the Delta, or piney woods, prairies, and remote mountains in other parts of the state; four interviewers were women. Some of the Washington officials suspected the compassion and enthusiasm caused the Interviewers to oversell the conditions and hope at Dyess and to understate the difficulties of cultivating cotton in the Delta.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup>“Dyess Colony, Inc,” RG 96, Acc. S9AI2I3, Box 182.

The Washington RA staff was convinced that the key to proper family selection lay in good recommendations from the county Rural Rehabilitation Supervisors. Some of these officials had "oversold" the project to their least successful clients. Many of the county supervisors refused to mention the project to their best clients. They did not want to lose their most successful clients, or best mules. As a result, some of the applicants came to Dyess expecting almost utopian conditions while others never became applicants because the county supervisor never informed them about Dyess. Later analysis of the Dyess family selection identified another problem. Despite the training and introduction to Dyess, the Regional Interviewers had often oversold Dyess. Compared to the places and under the conditions that their clients lived, the possibilities at Dyess made it difficult for young college-educated social workers to remain objective and analytical. Part of the interviewer's duty was to dissuade those who demonstrably were unsuited for the project.<sup>53</sup>

Soon other problems occupied the minds and conversations of the colonists. The "Deferred Balances" loomed large in their fears. In addition to the debts transferred from the RRC, the balance grew because of particular circumstances. The initial ERA grant to Dyess Colony included a substantial reserve fund, designed to ensure the colony's existence should there be unusual or aberrant situations. Because of the reserves and the provision that applied all payments, not to the U. S. Treasury but to Dyess Colony, Inc, the Board of Directors were free to provide liberal conditions for the repayment of the Deferred and Capital Goods Accounts. Should a colonist not be able to pay on the two

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<sup>53</sup> Kennan, "Procedure Followed"; "Dyess Colony Selection Narrative"; "Dyess Colony, Inc"; Holt, "An Analysis of Methods and Criteria Used." "Dyess Colony, Inc."



accounts, arrangements were quickly and easily arranged for payment at some future time. Payments were applied only to the furnish account until the balance on that account was satisfied. Only after the furnish account had been paid, were payments allocated to Deferred or Capital Goods Accounts. However, even the seniority of the furnish debt and its claim to first payment did not halt the growth of the furnish balance. It seemed that aberrant situations hindered the colonist's ability to achieve complete amortization of previous furnish and capital goods accounts within the first four years, as Colony officials initially forecast. Most of the colonists came after January 1936; therefore, many of them had time to clear and plant only a fraction of their acreage, a large part of what they planted was devoted to vegetables and feed. Part of the reason for this liberality was the flood of 1937. The flood further delayed land clearing, the government men evacuated all the mules, and their evacuation and temporary care cost the Colony \$10,712.05. No one could make a payment on Deferred and Capital Goods Accounts; the government wrote off all the 1937 and one-half of the 1938 Furnish Accounts. No payment was required on the Deferred and Capital Goods Accounts, but interest still accrued at 5%.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Minutes: Meeting of Board of Directors, Dyess Colony, Inc., 17 February 1936; 25 March 1936; Minutes: Special Meeting of Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc., 29 October 1936; Minutes: Meeting Board of Directors, 16 March 1938; all in WPA Administrative File. In December 1938, Floyd Sharp announced the plan for amortizing the "Frozen Accounts." Colonists were assessed yearly payments in installments of \$25, \$50, and \$75, depending on the balance. In spite of the delay in calculating the sale price of the farms, Sharp insisted that the colonists understand the total amount of the annual debt obligations.

### The End

The 20 April 1939 postal telegram was addressed to Floyd Sharp as WPA Administrator, not as President of Dyess Colony, Inc. Corrington Gill, the Assistant Administrator of the Works Progress Administration wired Sharp:

Petitions by various inhabitants of Dyess Colony received complaining, in brief, that cost of land to them would be its actual cost, said to be two dollars fifty per acre, and improvements thereon whereas actually corporation is trying to force deeds upon them at a cost exceeding seventy five dollars per acre. Complaints also re eviction suites (*sic*) against S. B. Funk and A. J. McCraven. Various other complaints by petitioners alleging abuses. Please submit written report as soon as possible.<sup>55</sup>

Just nineteen days earlier, Lawrence Westbrook had confided to Sharp that Gill desired merely to, “hold the situation in status quo pending final decision as to what agency of the government will be responsible for these communities.” The continuing agitation of McCraven, Funk, and Finch – and the murmuring among some – allowed no quiet environment in which to dispose of Dyess Colony.<sup>56</sup>

The original plan, and one continually reaffirmed by the Dyess Board, provided that in four years from inception, the Colonists would have established profitable Cooperatives to manage the marketing and ancillary activities. In four years, planners thought, all the 500 farms would be solidly secured by government mortgages, there would be no furnish or capital goods balances, and the New Deal would have demonstrated a way to redeem American agriculture. Dyess and the other two aberrant

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<sup>55</sup> Telegram, From Corrington Gill, Washington D.C. to Floyd Sharp, Little Rock, AR, 20 April 1939, RG 69 WPA Central Office Files.

<sup>56</sup> Letter to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, 9 March 1939; Lawrence Westbrook to “Dear Floyd,” 1 April 1939; Lawrence Westbrook to “Dear Floyd,” 21 April 1939; RG 69 WPA Central Office Files, 9 March 1939.

projects, Cherry Lake and Pine Mountain, would resurrect a player that America had not seen since the late seventeenth century. In an industrialized nation, in the midst of an agricultural technical revolution (cotton was mechanized later than any other American staple crop), and in a geo-economic environment in which gaining an economic and social competence from family-sized farms was impossible, the New Deal proposed a reappearance of the independent and disinterested yeoman farmer. He would plan his production for subsistence, trade his surplus for extra-community goods, and, perhaps sell his surplus according to notions of “just price” rather than market forces. The telegram and the issues addressed must have represented a dilemma for Sharp; to write an adequate report he would have to go back, at least to early 1937, if not earlier.<sup>57</sup>

Conditions that spawned petitions, eviction suits, and “various other complaints” were present at the beginning and became more robust with age. Floyd Sharp’s five years as President of Dyess Colony Incorporated and Arkansas WPA Director had just reached their nadir as Sharp received the telegram. Governor Carl Bailey had just dissolved Dyess Colony Incorporated and Sharp was trying to control his outrage against those who, in his opinion, were simply taking advantage of the naïve Colonists by making ludicrous charges of malfeasance against the Dyess staff and Board. Earlier in the year, at the Governor’s dissolution of the corporation, Floyd Sharp and Lawrence Westbrook had been trying to determine under which agency the Dyess Colony could avoid domination of Governor Bailey’s allies. At the same time Sharp was fearful that the colony and its remaining trust fund balance would fall into the hands of the Arkansas statehouse crowd; he was trying to find a way to rescue W.R. Dyess’s dream. It appeared

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<sup>57</sup> *The Colony Herald*, 1 May 1936; *The Commercial Appeal*, 5 November 1936;

as if Governor Bailey had won. That the WPA would call Sharp to account for conditions and actions concerning a program over which the WPA nor any other agency had authority served only to accent the gravity of the situation. Normally matters concerning Dyess were addressed to him as President of Dyess Colony, even those from other governmental departments and agencies, particularly the Works Progress Administration. The corporate entity that removed Dyess from WPA and RA control also removed it from their protection. The fall-out from Dyess might very well negatively affect Sharp's career and it might disassemble the patronage system he controlled.<sup>58</sup>

Perhaps events in January 1937 were a portent of troubles coming to Dyess. The first years of the Colony's existence, 1934-35 were times of bustle and construction; of designing and redesigning; of recruiting and explaining; and then the almost sudden culminating rush of colonists who came to Dyess in early 1936. Only those who came in 1934 had a chance to clear a significant portion of their acres in time for the 1935 crop; some who came in 1936 also were not able to clear land quickly enough to harvest a cash crop. Nineteen thirty-seven should have been a great year for Dyess Colony. Most of the colonists had positive attitudes about their new homes and landlords; families had cleared a substantial amount of land; pigs, mules, milch cows, and chickens supplied food for the table and power for the fields; and fine new schools educated the children. The women's clubs were robustly improving themselves, and fully intended to improve everybody else. The year of 1937 would demonstrate what hardworking and right-minded people could do if they only had a fair chance. But, Dyess Colony was in the heart of the Great

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<sup>58</sup> Letter to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, 9 March 1939; Lawrence Westbrook to "Dear Floyd," 21 April 1939; RG 69 WPA Central Office Files, 9 March 1939.

American Delta and in the Delta success had always been as much a function of chance as equity. In January when the Mississippi River flooded, again, and backed the Tyronza River over the flat Delta land, Dyess colonists were evacuated to higher and drier places; the crop at Dyess Colony was delayed while workers cleared and cleaned and waited on the colony's mules to return from their exile at the state prison farm.<sup>59</sup>

In spite of the 1937 flood, the Colony was making fair progress in becoming a major player in the Delta cotton hierarchy. Resident Manager E.S. Dudley reported to Westbrook on 13 November 1937, despite bad weather, that the colony had ginned 1,493 bales of cotton totaling 788,133 pounds. The long staple and high-tensile strength cotton grown at Dyess was denser than the common upland green seed cotton sewn by most producers. The average bale of Dyess cotton weighed almost 528 pounds, the typical bale of cotton in the 1930s weighed around 500 pounds, but often less. The cotton bale is a measure of volume rather than weight. In a further effort to increase the market value of cotton, Westbrook and Sharp were, in 1937, discussing with the Arkansas and Florida extension services the possibility, and risk, of planting the even more valuable sea-island strain of cotton, heretofore grown successfully only in coastal South Carolina and Georgia. In 1937, the occasional vocal complaint and the sometimes-casual attitude about "community spirit" had become, by the end of the year, a murmur; in the next two years, it became a roar.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> "Memorandum to All Colony Families," from Floyd Sharp 31 December 1938, WPA Central Office Records. Minutes: Meeting Board of Directors of Dyess Colony, Inc., 17 March 1937. WPA Administrative File.

<sup>60</sup> Letter to Lawrence Westbrook from D.S. Dudley, 15 November 1937; To H.C. Baker from Claude J. Byrd, Cotton Branch Experiment Station, Marina, AR, 25 October 1937; letter to H.S. Sanders, WPA Administrator, Pensacola, FL to G.G. Tomlinson, WPA

Even the first colonists expressed some anxiety about the initial rental agreements. The biggest problem seems to have been not the probationary period, but the undetermined price of the new farms. The government men tried to explain to the colonists that the final price of the farm could not be determined until the entire planned infrastructure and ancillary facilities were completed. There were certain adjustments necessary in order for equity in pricing the farms. For example, initially only two acres of ground was cleared for each new farm-site. The land adjacent to the house was cleared as a convenience to new arrivals; new comers would at least have a garden spot. The colonists were expected to clear their own property, if the colony cleared any land beyond the two acres, then the colonists would be charged \$15.00 for each acre cleared. The rental and the purchase contract allowed the Colony, in cases where a colonist's progress was not satisfactory, to clear land and to add the per acre charge to the purchase price. In the spring of 1936, against stated colony policy, some of the Colonists were employed at relief work wages by ERA schedule to clear their own land. The alteration in the Dyess policy was to speed up cotton production, to make up for lost time. Some Colonists claimed that they were not given credit for the land they had cleared while on relief work. They felt that the amount of land they had cleared while drawing relief wages should be exempt from the land clearing charges included in the price of the farms. Precisely why they expected to be paid for the work and at the same time draw all the benefit of the work for their own profit puzzled the government men. Many of the Colonists thought that the price of the house was inflated and almost all thought that the price for the land was extortionary. It was common knowledge that Dyess had bought the

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Memphis, TN, 11 October 1937; letter to Floyd Sharp from H.D. Sanders, Regional Engineer, WPA Memphis, 16 October 1937; all in RG 69 WPA Central Office Records.

land for \$2.50 an acre. The government men wanted \$75.00; some said \$90.00 an acre. Some said they never would have signed the rental agreement had they known how much the farms would cost.<sup>61</sup>

The government men assured the Colonists that the government would charge only what the property and its development cost. Such notables as Lawrence Westbrook and Floyd Sharp made efforts to allay anxieties about the price; in no case, said Sharp, would the farms cost more than they had cost the government. At least that is what he told them in 1935. By 1936, the colonists were assured that the prices would be "reasonable." In the halcyon days of early spring 1936, Sharp reassured the concerned Colonists:

... We have delayed the actual selling of these homes to the families until such a time as we could complete most of the buildings. Meanwhile families have been moved in on tentative agreements. We are now in the final stages of the Colony construction and beginning to plan for the future.

... You can start to work with every assurance that your interest is our interest, your success our success, and that these homes will be sold at a fair price and payments extended over a period of years within the reasonable earnings of the property. The new Corporation will work out these sales contracts with you shortly after the dedication of the Colony which is now tentatively scheduled for the month of June.

... We want you to know that we are more interested in your having a home and being in position to earn an independent living than we are in collecting back the money used in this development. We make this statement, not because we want to leave the impression that you will not be required to pay for this property, but because we know that once you have a comfortable home and facilities for making a living, the actual

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<sup>61</sup> "Dyess Colony, Inc, Colonist Attitudes"; "Procedures Followed"; "Dyess Colony Section Narrative"; "One of Several Interviews." "Memorandum to All Colony Families." "Operating Principles at Dyess," speech delivered at Dyess by Lawrence Westbrook, 3 August 1936, RG 96.

annual payments that you will be required to make to the Corporation for your home will be an easy task.<sup>62</sup>

Resident Manager E. S. Dudley published assurances in the Colony newspaper, and all the Regional Interviewers as well as Dyess Family Selection Personnel, presumably, had addressed with comforting assurances and as much clarity as they could muster, the -as-yet-undetermined price of the farms. What had been mild anxiety for some became outraged resistance by others on the distribution of the first land deeds to the settlers at Dyess Colony. S. B. Funk, citing his own work in clearing the land and the initial land price of \$2.50 an acre refused to sign the purchase contract. Not only did Funk refuse to sign, he also articulated his charges and suspicions freely and found that some of the Colonists were also dissatisfied with the conditions and requirements of Dyess. He conferred with Colonist A.J. McCraven and McCraven also refused to sign his contract. Some were surprised that the land contracts did not allow them total freedom to sell their property as they saw fit. Until the balance had been paid, said the contract and government men, the property could be transferred only to Dyess Colony, Inc. If the Colonist wanted to sell, he only had one potential customer.<sup>63</sup>

Other things bothered some of the Dyess Colonists. The Farm Manager and Assistant Director Jake Terry was domineering and abrasive. Homer Donaldson complained to President Roosevelt.

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<sup>62</sup> "Memorandum to All Colony Families," from Floyd Sharp, 19 February 1936; WPA Central Office Files.

<sup>63</sup> "Operating Principles," by Lawrence Westbrook, speech to the Colonists at Dyess, AR, 3 August 1936, RG 96, AK - 80 003. "Memorandum to All Colony Families," from Floyd Sharp, 30 December 1938; "Memorandum to All Colony Families," from Floyd Sharp, 19 February 1936; WPA Central Office Files.



Mr. Dudley and Mr. Terry (the managers) stopped me in the road and Terry began to use abusive language and I ask him to quit and then he begot (*sic*) worse and when I did the same he struck at me. I have two witness (*sic*) on this as it happened in front of Mario Ratton's home house 556 and Mr. Pulliam of house 562 was with me. Mr. Ratton was very dissatisfied with the way they done in hearing of his house. . . and that is the way Mr. Terry has been doing here . . . and most of the people here will tell you the same.<sup>64</sup>

The Dyess bosses, Sharp, R. C. Limerick, H.S. Henry, and Lawrence Westbrook were cognizant of his prickly personality and imperious manner. Baker, Limerick, Sharp, and Westbrook discussed his contempt of the colonists, and deemed it unfortunate considering Mr. Terry's demonstrated farm ability. However, when Terry refused to take Westbrook's advice to have samples of the Colony's cotton graded, and as a result the Colony's crop brought a lower price, the bosses decided that Terry's services were no longer required.<sup>65</sup>

One of Floyd Sharp's most frustrating endeavors at Dyess was the formation of a Cooperative Association that could assume ownership and operation of the various Colony centers at a profit. In an effort to explain the cooperative contract to the colonists and to encourage them to join, in 1938 Sharp hired lawyer C. T. Carpenter of Marked Tree, Arkansas. Carpenter had demonstrated sympathy for the dispossessed and he had recently fallen out of favor with some of his recent clientele. His representation of evicted Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) members had diminished his practice. He hoped to educate the Colonists about the cooperative principle in general and the

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<sup>64</sup> Letter from Homer Donaldson to President Roosevelt, 31 May 1937, WPA Central Office Files.

<sup>65</sup> Letter to Floyd Sharp, from Lawrence Westbrook, 11 May 1938; to Lawrence Westbrook from Floyd Sharp, 21 May 1938; letter to Eleanor Roosevelt from Mrs. W. M. Johnson, 2 February 1939: all in WPA Central Office Files. Letter to Jake Terry from Floyd Sharp, 21 October 1938, WPA Administrative File.

benefits of the Producers Cooperative in particular. He had great difficulty. In Sharp's memorandum to the Colonists outlining procedures for 1939 he explained that now, after the three years of construction and the flood and the reorganization of the Consumer's Cooperative, the Colony and the colonists would prosper. It was true, he said, that the Colony would no longer subsidize the Hospital. It was also true that for a two-month period, the Colony would bear the expense of returning colonists to their homes or to an equidistant place before February 28, 1939. The Colony offered this feature in order to accommodate the Dyess families that were dissatisfied. The Colony, said Sharp, intended to never make such an offer again. The furnish for 1939 would be handled exclusively by the Dyess Credit Union. Owned by the Cooperative Association, twelve of the twenty Directors were employees of the WPA or of Dyess Colony, Incorporated. All crops and all property would be pledged to the bank in security of the furnish. The maximum amount of furnish would be calculated based on ten cents per pound, 400 pounds per acre.<sup>66</sup>

By the time Sharp received the telegram from Corrington the end was near. As early as June 1938, T. Roy Reid had called on Sharp inquiring about Sharp's attitude concerning transferring Dyess Colony to the Farm Security Administration. Sharp and Westbrook discussed the FSA's interest in Dyess and Sharp commented on the competition among federal agencies. The governor's revocation of the Dyess Charter had effectively dissolved the corporation and Floyd informed Westbrook that the Arkansas statutes allowed a dissolved corporation three years to conclude all its business

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<sup>66</sup> "Memorandum to all Colony Families" from Floyd Sharp, 30 December 1938; WPA Administrative File.

and liquidate its holdings. That meant, said Floyd, the \$200,000 government bond, held in a Little Rock bank box, the remnant of the once robust Dyess Trust Fund, was safe from confiscation by the state.<sup>67</sup>

During the remainder of 1939, Funk and McCraven gathered publicity and focused their outrage over the price of the farms. Their non-Colonist neighbor, Paul Finch made charges so outrageous that even rabid anti-New Deal critics grew tired. By the end of the year, Dyess Colony had become the property and concern of the Farm Security Administration. Through a complicated procedure the Colony was liquidated in January 1944, but all the details were not settled until 1951. Some colonists moved away at great loss, some sold and moved away, and some made large farms and stayed. The losses at Dyess were enormous. The only positive is that the losses to the U.S. Government amounted to less each year.<sup>68</sup>

#### In Retrospect

S. B. Funk had no real reason to complain, at least as far as the price of his farm was concerned. Administrators at Dyess went to great lengths to explain the \$2.50-per-acre price that W.R. Dyess paid at the outset. Interviewers were encouraged to provoke questions and if the questions were not forthcoming from the prospective colonists, to propose a question and answer. Funk claimed that his five-room house was over-priced, that he was charged too great a fee for his turn-in bridge, and that he was not given credit for the land he had cleared. In response to Funk's complaint, Dyess Colony requested

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<sup>67</sup> Letter to Colonel Francis C. Harrington, Federal Administrator, WPA, from Floyd Sharp, 17 March 1939.

<sup>68</sup> Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 238-39.

that the Colony's accountants, Russell, Brown, and Company analyze the cost of Funk's property. They reported that the cost of the five-room house, barn, poultry house, turn-in-bridge, and 36.99 acres was \$3,539.56. A credit of \$275.90 toward land clearing reduced the cost to \$3, 265.66. The sales price to Funk was reduced to \$2,999.52. The accountants pointed out, notwithstanding normally accepted standard accounting procedures, no prorated charges for community infrastructure had been added to the sales price. Funk's assertions were without foundation. Funk's price-per-acre, including the house and structures, was \$81.09. Excluding the house and structures, the land price was \$19.37 per acre. According to Russell Brown & Company, the market value for cleared and drained Delta cropland was between \$90.00 and \$100.00 per acre, and even for "buckshot" land in the midst of an agricultural depression.<sup>69</sup>

Paul Finch's challenges were more difficult to refute, in part, because he dealt in the murky world of intrigue, conspiracy, innuendo, and motives. Finch was not a Colonist but his small farm was almost completely surrounded by Dyess land. His property was a salient into the Dyess community. Dyess Resident Manager E. S. Dudley did not get any good information regarding Finch's activities until later than he thought. Dudley wrote to H.C. Baker and Lawrence Westbrook in May of 1938, reporting on a meeting that took place at the Finch place amongst fractious colonists. Apparently, said Dudley, the meeting, details about which he had just heard, was one of a series and it was the only one about which Dudley had any information. He did have, he said, a list of those thought to be closely allied with Finch and Funk who had attempted to keep the

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<sup>69</sup> Letter from Russell, Brown, and Company, Certified Public Accountants, to The Officers and Directors, Dyess Colony, Inc., 8 February 1939.

Dyess staff ignorant of the meetings. Some people had reported seeing Finch and Funk entering various colony houses. He suspected that those who attended were just curious. One Colonist told him that the only reason that he went to sign the petition criticizing the Dyess management was that he wanted a ride to town. On the whole, Dudley told Baker, he did not think Finch was a cause for great alarm because even some of the more prominent citizens of south Mississippi County viewed Funk as a troublemaker and a danger to labor relations.<sup>70</sup>

Lawrence Westbrook was concerned about Finch's activities before word of the meeting(s) came to Dudley. He inquired of H.L. Mitchell, the Executive Secretary of the STFU, as to whether or not the trouble at Dyess and with Mr. Finch reflected the activities of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Mitchell reported that he knew of no such union activity at Dyess, but did advise that Union activist Howard Kester was tentatively scheduled to speak at Dyess on 8 April. Lawrence Westbrook cheerfully reported to Sharp that the STFU was innocent of the trouble at Dyess and heartily endorsed Kester's appearance at the Colony. Howard Kester, said Westbrook, was a "high quality person."<sup>71</sup>

Finch demanded that the Board of Directors and staff at Dyess resign and their positions be filled by Dyess colonists, and elected by the membership. All decisions would require the validation by a majority of Dyess members. A jury of twelve men selected by the Dyess membership would decide any issues requiring further adjudication, Finch proposed. He charged that the colony industries, a favored project of

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<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> Letter from Lawrence H. L. Mitchell to Lawrence Westbrook, 30 March 1938; Westbrook to Floyd Sharp, 1 April 1938 both in WPA Management File.

Lawrence Westbrook, were sweatshops, the colony charged \$30.00 to \$35.00 per ton of hay for which the colony paid only \$12.00 to \$17.00, and the bosses at Dyess were greedy, arrogant, and incompetent. Furthermore, said his newspaper article, 99% of the colonists were dissatisfied and wanted the changes he recommended. Finch was exaggerating his support. By far most of the Dyess residents, even in the midst of Finch's most vigorous criticisms, did not support the revolt or sign the petition. Most of the Colonists were embarrassed by the reportage – it made them look ridiculous.<sup>72</sup>

In late 1939, Dyess Colony was transferred to the Farm Security Administration. The FSA closed out the various credit accounts, negotiated a price for the farms and settlement of the debts. Dyess, Arkansas became very quickly, and remains to this day, a typical seedy, blighted Delta town. The deeds and mortgages presented by the FSA allowed Dyess farms to be sold piecemeal. Some settlers stayed and retired at Dyess. Some prospered and retired elsewhere. Most did not stay at Dyess. They appreciated the opportunity, the enhanced living conditions, the excellent schools, and the chance that Dyess gave to think and to evaluate options. Those that left Dyess Colony moved for the same reasons as did the Tupelo Homesteaders. Some things are too precious to sacrifice. The President had urged young men to settle for a "competence" in the country rather than gamble on getting rich in the city. The Dyess folks, like those at Tupelo were not

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<sup>72</sup> *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 19 April 1938. Paul F Finch to Floyd Sharp, 10 May 1938; Floyd Sharp to Senator Caraway, 4 April 1938; Geneve Holland to "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt," 2 April 1939, all in WPA Central Office File.

ready to settle for a competence, and they would form a community and cooperate with those of their own choosing and preference.<sup>73</sup>

One reads Arthur Raper's work on two Georgia counties to understand why Dyess seemed to offer such a great opportunity for the advancement of poor Arkansans. In Georgia, a terrible combination of thin and nutrient-poor soil, gashing erosion that destroyed cropland, the boll weevil, and a degenerate credit system devastated the cotton economy and the lives of tenant farmers. By contrast, at Dyess black buckshot Delta ground lay supine in anticipation of seed. The land seemed to revel in its almost gratuitous fecundity. New Dealers imagined that the rich, non-eroding, boll weevil resistant Delta could sustain a community of subsistence-minded yeomen. The government men at Dyess modified the crop-lien system; the quartet of evils that plagued Greene and Macon Counties, Georgia did not exist at Dyess. Hindsight allows contemporaries to see with much greater resolution notions that were confused and hazy to the New Deal government men. Even with fine schools, comfortable houses, adequate food, and medical care, most Dyess settlers decided that the sacrifices required to achieve them were too great. For one thing, no matter what the government men said, twenty acres – even Delta acres, were not enough. And then there was the main reason for their

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<sup>73</sup> Franklin D. Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume 2, Year of Crises* (New York: Random House, 1928), 320. *Arkansas Gazette*, 10 June 1977. *Memphis Press Scimitar*, 2 May 1938. Letter from Mrs. Velma Bullard Pittman to Floyd Sharp, 21 April 1938; Geneve Holland to "Dear Mrs. Roosevelt," 2 April 1939, both in WPA Management File.

discontent, they did not necessarily have a problem with authority – they just did not like other people telling them what to do.<sup>74</sup>

The RA was efficient in moving clients to Dyess, the conditions and opportunities at Dyess were not sufficient to create a content and satisfied community of yeoman farmers. Tensions between the government men and clients, aggravated by paternalistic attitudes and political ambition retarded the cooperation demanded by the bosses. The experiment at Dyess suggested that the problem of poverty among small cotton farmers in the South was not a function of the boll weevil, or thin soil, or erosion. The major problem was much more fundamental. It was no longer possible, even on the best agricultural land in the world, for a family to make a living on twenty to forty acre cotton farms.

Such is the story of the Tupelo Homesteads and Dyess Colony. The effort of New Dealers at Tupelo and Dyess represents only one part of the effort to lift the “Shadows Over Goshen.” There was trouble brewing throughout the cotton country. Socialist Christians, Marxists of various stripes, and dispossessed sharecroppers gathered near Hill House, Mississippi and proceeded to conduct, arguably, the most radical agrarian experiment in U.S. History – mingling Jesus and Marx in the Mississippi Delta. Chapter Six is about Christians and Socialists and sharecroppers; liberal paternalism and repression; and the death of a vision. It is the story of Delta Cooperative Farm.

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<sup>74</sup> Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005; reprint, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1936), *passim*.



## CHAPTER VI

### DELTA COOPERATIVE FARM AND THE DEATH OF A VISION

*Why dont (sic) you fellows come down off the official high horse and be human for a while. The Christmas season is a good time to begin. And the plantation country waits for you to make it a real "new deal" for these forgotten men . . .* William Amberson to T. Roy Reid, 22 December 1934.

*The attendant loose talk also runs along bad lines: social equality and what have you. If I were in your place and could afford to do so, I would take a vacation and spend some of my time at Hill House.* W.M. Kethley, President, Delta State Teachers College to Francis Harmon, General Secretary, YMCA

*If we can build the union, we will take over all the damn plantations.* H.L. Mitchell to Howard Kester

*We endeavor to exemplify the return of Christianity to its prophetic mission of identification with the dispossessed . . .*" Reinhold Niebuhr

*Never before have I seen with such blinding clarity the essential and irreconcilable conflict between the scientific and the ecclesiastical approach to social problems.* William Amberson<sup>1</sup>

The agricultural depression in the cotton South was in its thirteenth year by the time the Federal Government thought it necessary to intervene. The gap between the onset of the agricultural depression in 1919 and the belated governmental action in 1933 occurred because the bulk of the depression burden fell on people who did not matter. As

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<sup>1</sup>Letter from W.M. Kethley to Francis Harmon, 8 October 1936, University of Memphis Archives, MVHC, MSS 16, Delta Cooperative Farm. H.L. Mitchell to Howard Kester, 22 March 1936, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, Roll 3, Originals in the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC. Hereinafter the microfilm edition of the STFU Papers cited as "STFU Microfilm." Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1969), 54. "Untitled ms., University of Memphis Archives, Mississippi Valley Historical Collection, #13, Box 1, folder3, "Delta Cooperative Farm Papers," copy, the quote is attributed to Niebuhr. "A Statement to the Board of Trustees," Southern Tenant Farmers' Union Papers, University of North Carolina, SHC.

long as degradation and poverty inflicted predominately southern rural blacks, there was no political necessity and little moral urgency in applying corrective measures. However, the general depression of 1929 was rapidly creating a class of dispossessed whites who found themselves bound by the same economic and social chains that had immobilized blacks since Reconstruction. The Tupelo Homesteaders took brief refuge from the economic storm and the Dyess Colonists yielded to duress; the Cooperators at Delta Cooperative Farm fled from stark terror.

The crop reduction activities of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA) necessarily required that agriculture and its attendant protocols undergo intense scrutiny and adjustment. As the policies of the AAA intruded on the familiar cotton production procedures in the South, certain regional peculiarities came into view. The AAA implemented policies and created a situation very much analogous to turning over a rotting log in the woods; turn it over and all sorts of creatures are exposed to light.

Widespread malnutrition, pellagra, hookworm, mental retardation, almost unbelievable poverty, and a robust repressive economic system slithered into public view as provisions of the crop reduction campaign of the AAA disturbed the cotton culture environment. Sharecropping and the crop-lien system had long been a regional scandal. Regional scholars and activists examined almost every aspect of the system but this work remained within a tightly constructed circle of academics and published studies did not appear until well into the mid 1930s. Novels with a sharecropping motif, Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) and *God's Little Acre* (1933) for instance, did appear.

According to historian Donald Holley, they were popular because of their frank treatment of sex rather than as exposes of the conditions of sharecropping or tenancy.<sup>2</sup>

FDR believed that reconciliation of the dissonance in prices between industry and agriculture was essential to national recovery. In his inaugural address, President Roosevelt promised to promulgate, “. . . definite efforts to raise the values of agricultural products and with this the power to purchase the output of our cities.”<sup>3</sup> FDR responded to the political pressure and the economic emergency and satisfied his inaugural promise by asking Congress to approve the Agricultural Adjustment Act. Especially important in the bill was its call for parity prices and the authority of the president and the secretary of agriculture to establish a balance between agricultural and industrial prices. The president specifically proposed to raise agricultural prices to parity. He defined parity as the relationship of agricultural commodities and industrial prices as measured by the prices in the base period, August 1909 - July 1914.<sup>4</sup> The act also allowed the secretary to reduce the production of agricultural commodities by paying farmers rental or benefit payments for land withdrawn from production.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Holley, *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 90

<sup>3</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Volume Two, Year of Crises* (New York: Random House, 1938), 74.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Statutes at Large, Vol. 48, Pt.1, pp. 32; Conrad, 22. There were a few exceptions to the 1909-1914 base period. The base period for tobacco, for example, was 1919-1929.

<sup>5</sup> Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 23.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act clearly sought to alleviate the distress of middle class and prosperous farmers, and was a significant plank in the president's plan for industrial recovery. FDR believed that reduced consumer spending came, in part, as a result of the loss of farm income. Even with the mass pull of cities, in 1933, fully sixty percent of the population still had rural or farm connections. The president blamed much of the decline in manufacturing on the inability of this large population to consume the output of industry.

Cully Cobb, Director of the Cotton Section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration claimed that implementation of the AAA crop reduction contracts had no effect on agricultural labor or tenancy. Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, admitted that there were some unfortunate incidents. Scholars agree that the AAA cotton producer contracts imposed severe repression and hardships on those at the very bottom of agricultural society to the benefit of middle-class American farmers and the cotton aristocracy, those most aggressively represented by the American Farm Bureau.<sup>6</sup>

In response to the hardships brought on by the AAA programs, two distinct socialist camps converged to create the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms. In the Northeast Arkansas Delta, a country dry cleaner, an internationally acclaimed intellectual, a county constable, America's most famous contemporary missionary, and a perpetual Socialist Party presidential candidate listened to the humanitarian views of a distinguished professor of physiology. From his avocation as a guiding member of the

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<sup>6</sup> Roy V. Scott and J.G. Shoalmire, *The Public Career of Cully A. Cobb: A Study in Agricultural Leadership*, (Jackson: College and University Press of Mississippi, 1973); Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton*, 19-21, 23, 59,61; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 24-25.

Memphis Chapter of the Socialist Party of America, Dr. William Ruthraugh Amberson, professor of physiology at the University of Tennessee Medical School in Memphis, provided the practical guidance that resulted in the formation of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU) and the intellectual genesis of Delta Cooperative Farm. Amberson and the Delta Cooperative Farm – and its lineal descendant, the Providence Cooperative Farm – have received little attention from scholars of the STFU. The scholarly literature on the Southern Tenant Farmers Union is huge.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The papers of the STFU, originals at Chapel Hill, are available in more than sixty publicly accessible archives. Donald Holley gives the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms four sentences and makes no mention of Amberson in his fine book *Uncle Sam's Farmers: The New Deal Communities in the Lower Mississippi Valley* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 106, 192. H.L. Mitchell, in what must be considered the authorized word on the STFU, *Mean Things Happening in This Land: The Life and Times of H.L. Mitchell, Co-Founder of the Southern Tenant Farmers Union* (Montclair, New Jersey: Allanheld, Osmun & Co., 1979) briefly mentions Delta Farm in four places, but Amberson is given somewhat fuller treatment. Paul Conklin, *Tomorrow a New World: The New Deal Community Program* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1959) treats the farm in thirty-four words. Neither David E. Hamilton, *From New Day to new Deal: American Farm Policy From Hoover to Roosevelt, 1928-1933* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), nor Paul E. Mertz, *New Deal Policy and Southern Rural Poverty* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1978) mention either farm. Mertz gives slight attention to Amberson. The most impassioned scholarly work on the STFU is Donald Grubbs, *Cry From the Cotton: The Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the New Deal* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1971.) Grubbs takes no notice of either farm but he gives Amberson fuller attention than any of the other scholars. Anthony P. Dunbar, *Against the Grain: Southern Radicals and Prophets, 1929-1959* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1981), gives insight into some of the personalities but not the details of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms. Jonathan Daniels, in his highly reflective, speculative, anecdotal, biased, yet frustratingly well-written panoramic view of the depression South, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (New York: The McMillan Company, 1938), gives significant attention to the work of the STFU and of Delta Cooperative Farm. Daniels and to an even greater degree, David Cohn, are typical of the breezy, poetic, yet banal treatment of social conditions in the Delta. The only satisfactory treatment of the Delta and Providence Cooperative farm is Jerry W. Dallas, "The Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms: A Mississippi Experiment in Cooperative Farming and Racial Cooperation, 1936-1956," *Mississippi Quarterly* 4 (3) (1987): 283-308.

The first group of Socialist activists, composed of liberal churchmen headed by Reinhold Niebuhr, endeavored to:

... exemplify the return of Christianity to its prophetic mission of identification with the dispossessed, of bearing witness of the judgment of God in history upon the injustices of the existing economic and political order, and of aiding men to enter into the possibilities of a more abundant life with which God has endowed His creation.<sup>8</sup>

After studies at Eden Theological Seminary and Yale Divinity School, Niebuhr served as a pastor in Detroit for thirteen years. In 1928, he joined the faculty of Union Theological Seminary as Professor of Christian Ethics and remained there until his retirement in 1960. His influence on moral, ethical, and religious philosophy was and is enormous. His best-known and most influential works were *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932) *Beyond Tragedy* (1937), *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (1941), *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), and *The Irony of American History* (1952). The Delta and Cooperative Farms proved to be a laboratory for the application of lessons that Niebuhr hoped would emerge from *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. Interestingly, it was a thesis of this very book that Amberson later hurled accusatively at the directors of Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms as he resigned from the board of trustees.

The Christian Socialists most intimately associated with Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms identified with, and were heavily influenced by Niebuhr. Sherwood Eddy, a student and protégé of Niebuhr, had written numerous meditation books and

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<sup>8</sup> University of Memphis Archives, Mississippi Valley Collection #13, Box 1, folder 3, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, untitled manuscript (copy). This manuscript is divided into twenty parts and is a synopsis of Delta Cooperative Farm. Its divisions include: characteristics, operations, finances, cultural and social aspects, race relations, etc. Handwritten notations say "author unknown." There is no notation about the location or even the existence of the original of this mss.

traveled the world as a missionary and trouble-shooter for the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Over the course of his career, he witnessed Soviet collective operations, assisted cooperative farmers in Japan, conversed with Adolph Hitler, Benito Mussolini, and Joseph Stalin, and served as point-man for many humanitarian fund-raising efforts. Sam H. Franklin, a protégé of Eddy, spent his early career as a Presbyterian missionary to Japan. Franklin became the first resident director of Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms. Finally, A. E. (Gene) Cox, a recent graduate of Texas Christian University, with interests in accountancy and the Bible, came to the attention of Sherwood Eddy. Eddy convinced Cox that the letters GPC, which had appeared to Cox in a vision, did not mean "Go Preach Christ," but rather they were directing him to "Go Pick Cotton" in Mississippi. Cox initially served as the farm bookkeeper and, upon Franklin's resignation, he became the Resident Director. He remained in that post until the Providence Cooperative Farm finally closed in 1956.<sup>9</sup>

These "Christian Socialists" paid more attention to humanitarian than political objectives. They did not speak in traditional Marxist terms, nor did they concern themselves with party orthodoxy or direction. They were, in the main, nominal socialists and did not see any particular economic or political ideology as a cure for economic and cultural distress. Their political notions were somewhat analogous to Tugwell's view of pragmatism; God's graces were not subject to any particular civic government form, and a pleasure economy required neither the blessings of Adam Smith nor the inevitability of

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<sup>9</sup> The biographical information on Niebuhr is taken from the back cover of: Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932). Sherwood Eddy, *Eighty Adventurous Years: An Autobiography* (New York: Harpers, 1955). Sam H. Franklin, "Early Years of the Delta Cooperative Farm and the Providence Cooperative Farm," photocopy of privately published document, Alcoa, TN, 1980) 17-18, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University Library, Special Collections.

Karl Marx. Socialism seemed the best response to what they saw as perverted capitalism. Their experience in institutional governance emphasized their lack of fealty to socialist dogma. American Christianity, particularly the ecclesiastical tradition practiced by Niebuhr, was conducted within a highly hierarchical system. Ordained ministers, in all Christian traditions, were considered to have some "higher calling" than the parishioners and matters both spiritual and temporal were most often adjudicated by sessions, diaconates, conferences, presbyteries, conventions, and synods, and so forth. Thus, the church was in most cases a highly elitist institution. Taking comfort in their "higher calling" and drawing on their experience of elitist governance, these Christian Socialists found it difficult to allow popular or democratic governance. Their notions of elitist guidance and superior knowledge placed them in direct opposition to the philosophy of their secular socialist colleagues in the administration of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms.

A second camp of socialists also undertook to aid the sharecroppers of the South. Norman Thomas, perennial Socialist Party presidential candidate, led them, ostensibly. Thomas was a friend of FDR and had access to him from time to time. Clarence Senior, Executive Secretary of the Socialist Party of America, gave advice and helped with fundraising campaigns. Blaine Treadway, a member of the Executive Committee of the Socialist Party of Tennessee, worked part time as a press operator for the *Press Scimitar*, the Memphis evening newspaper much more sympathetic and balanced in its reporting of union activities than the conservative *Commercial Appeal*. Treadway had developed a close association with Amberson and later shared his increasing suspicion of the practices and ambitions of the Christian Socialist element involved with the cooperative farms. The chief operative, intellectual strategist and prime motivator of social activism was William Ruthraugh Amberson.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Amberson papers, box 1, folder 3. Citing his teaching load and union activities Amberson declined appointment as vice-chairman of a new committee on behalf of the



Dr. William R. Amberson earned his Ph.D. in physiology from Princeton in 1923. In the same year, he accepted a position as faculty at the University of Tennessee Medical School in Memphis. While there he co-authored six textbooks; he became head of the department in 1932. Amberson joined the Memphis Socialist Party, served as state secretary for the American Civil Liberties Union, and thoroughly involved himself in social activism. Through Amberson's close friendship with Paul Porter, administrative assistant to AAA head Chester Davis, the STFU gained an audience with the Secretary of Agriculture and placed a union representative on the 1937 President's Commission on Farm Tenancy. Amberson also maintained friendship with Paul Appleby, Executive Assistant to Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace. Amberson served as the union's liaison with the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote articles and letters for publication, coordinated the legal defense of union members, and collected evidence used to bring suit on behalf of the STFU against planters who had evicted sharecroppers under the provisions of the AAA contract. In addition to his founding work with the STFU and the enormous time and energy he devoted to its development, Amberson conceptualized and promoted the creation of Delta Cooperative Farm.

Even before the effects of the AAA cotton acreage reduction campaign were apparent in the mid-South, Amberson and the Socialist Party of Memphis were already trying to apply pressure on the authorities for better treatment of the dispossessed. On 5 June 1933, well before the AAA contracts were executed, Amberson, under the auspices of "the Committee of Socialist Party" (sic) issued a "Report of Investigations of Short-

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Scottsboro Boys being formed by the ACLU. A.E. Cox Collection, Series 7 folder 1c, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, letters to and from Senior, Treadway, Amberson, Thomas; William R. Amberson "Outline of Proposed Union," a copy of this document is also found at the University of Memphis Archives, Mississippi Valley Collection, the original at the Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Weighting and Similar Dishonest Practices by Merchants in the City of Memphis.” The report described the experiences of investigators in buying store-measured commodities and in redemption of relief coupons. The report named guilty individuals and companies and urged new city ordinances concerning weighing, the publication of guilty operators’ identities, and removal of certain merchants from the relief program. The committee presented its report to city officials and to the two major Memphis newspapers. No evidence exists that the report found publication or that Memphis Mayor Edward Hull “Boss” Crump’s political machine attempted any corrective measures. Several names appeared on the document. One of particular interest is that of George A. McLean. McLean was at the time a Professor of Sociology at Southwestern (now Rhodes College). One month before the Tupelo, Mississippi, Homesteaders moved into their new Division of Subsistence Homesteads (DSH) homes, McLean left Memphis and moved to Tupelo where he bought the *Tupelo Journal*. The names on this document are typed and there are no signatures. It is possible, though not likely, that McLean’s name was appended without his knowledge or permission. Rumors in the Tupelo area circulated, even after McLean’s leadership in developing Tupelo into a marvelously successful New South city, that McLean was a communist and that “they ran him out of Memphis back in the ‘30s.” Archival evidence indicates that at least another portion of the rumor has merit. Lucille Miller, Secretary of the Committee on Academic Freedom of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote to Amberson in June 1934. Her letter asked for information concerning Professor McClain’s (*sic*) dismissal from Southwestern College, “because of his activities on behalf of labor. This case has recently been called to our attention. We should like to have the facts.”<sup>11</sup> McLean was no communist, his business accomplishments attest to that. However, McLean was always in the forefront of social

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<sup>11</sup> Lucille Miller to William R. Amberson, 19 June 1934. William Ruthraugh Amberson Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill, NC.

improvement and incurred the disfavor of Tupelo's business elite in his early years in Tupelo.<sup>12</sup>

Tenant farmers and sharecroppers constituted the largest group of rural poor in the nation. In 1930, they totaled 1,091,944 white and 698,839 black families, about 25% of the South's population and about half its farmers. The conditions in the Delta were worse. In the Arkansas and Mississippi portions of the Delta, tenants or sharecroppers operated well over 85% of all farms. The 1930 Census figures are revealing. Arkansas tenants operated 152,691 of 242,334 farms. Of those, only 14,961 tenants paid cash rent. A representative Arkansas delta county, Desha, more accurately represents the cotton culture. Of 3,516 farms, tenants operated 3,130, a mere 481 of those were cash tenants. Tenants operated 225,716 of Mississippi's 312,663 farms; 27,103 paid rent. In a representative Mississippi Delta county, Tallahatchie, tenants cultivated cotton on 6,612 of the 7,298 farms; only 251 tenant farmers paid cash. The crop reduction program of the AAA paid farmers for taking land out of production. In the spring of 1934 Hiram Norcross, absentee owner of a 5,000-acre cotton plantation near Tyronza, Arkansas, evicted twenty-three of his 248 tenant families. Reduced acreage meant, obviously, a decreased need for labor. Wages for agricultural laborers in the cotton South averaged between fifty and seventy-five cents a day, and as planters began to see the economic advantage of replacing sharecroppers with day laborers, they forced hundreds of cotton sharecropping families to vacate their sub-standard housing. Many of them pitched tents along the road and sought relief from the already overwhelmed state emergency relief administrations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> University of Memphis Archives, MSS 36, folder 1, William Amberson Papers, "Report on Investigation of Short-Weighting and Similar Dishonest Practices in the City of Memphis." For a fuller discussion of McLean see Vaughn L. Grisham, *Tupelo: Evolution of A Community*, (Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999): *passim*.

<sup>13</sup> Charles S. Johnson, Edwin R. Embree, and Will W. Alexander, *The Collapse of Cotton Tenancy: A Summary of Field Studies and Statistical Surveys, 1933-1935* (Chapel Hill:

Eleven white and seven black men evicted from the Norcross plantation gathered nearby at the Sunnyside School and formed the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). The apparent force behind the new organization was the small Tyronza Socialist Party, the only two significant members were dry-cleaner H. L. Mitchell, and Clay East, a county constable. Mitchell reported that by the time he and East arrived at the meeting, the men had decided to form a bi-racial organization. According to Mitchell, the sharecroppers approached him with the idea of forming a union. It is likely that Mitchell had previously planted the organization idea as he made his rounds through the Arkansas countryside. It is also likely that Mitchell and Thomas got their notions from Amberson. Archival evidence clearly indicates that Amberson, Socialist Party of American Executive Secretary Clarence Senior, and Mitchell had already discussed the possibility and nature of some sort of sharecroppers' union.<sup>14</sup>

Communist-influenced black Alabama sharecroppers had already claimed "Sharecroppers Union" therefore, the group decided to incorporate in Arkansas under the name, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union (STFU). This name, however, was misleading. Although the union recruited tenant farmers for membership, the union championed the cause of sharecroppers, a class of society without representation in the government or economy. In part because the union chose to use "tenant farmer" as part of its name, the United States Government, newspapers, and the public of the 1930s often identified

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University of North Carolina Press, 1935,) 1 and *passim*; Grubbs, 43-45; Mertz, 3-4; The figures cited in this note are from: <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/cgi-local/censusbin/> The counties selected representing the Arkansas and Mississippi Delta are at the mid-point in terms of tenant concentration. As the decade continued the number of sharecroppers decreased.

<sup>14</sup> Mitchell says the idea of a sharecropper's union was first expressed to him by Norman Thomas in 1933, see correspondence between Amberson and Clarence Senior in "Correspondence, Amberson" Socialist Party of America Papers, Perkins Library, Special Collections, Duke University, Durham, NC.

sharecroppers as tenant farmers. This mingling of terms created its own set of problems. Upon the advent of the AAA crop reduction contracts there existed a marked difference in the social and economic status between that of the tenant farmer and the sharecropper, and the term "tenant farmer" is imprecise at best. In 1934, the public, the press, and government officials used the term "tenant farmer" indiscriminately and universally to designate as one single entity at least three separate classes of farmers, all of whom suffered from specific economic problems and faced different limitations in climbing the agricultural ladder. The designation was particularly important with regard to the AAA producer contract. The tenant farmer owned rights that were protected by the language of the contract; laborers had none. By manipulating the status of tenant farmers to that of sharecroppers, planters could relieve themselves of responsibility for furnish and housing. According to the AAA, sharecroppers were wage laborers and as such had no claim to shelter or furnish. It was cheaper to hire help during picking time than to have a family live on the place.<sup>15</sup>

In December 1934, Amberson presented a report for dissemination among the membership of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Socialist Party of America (SPA) on the "Present Status of Legal Action in the Defense of Tenants and Sharecroppers Threatened with Eviction." The report noted that more than 100 members of the STFU had received written or oral eviction notices from plantation management informing them that they must vacate houses and lands by December 31, 1935. The

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<sup>15</sup> Grubbs, 29; Mertz, 31; Conrad, 85, 87-93; William R. Amberson to Clarence Senior, Feb 4, 1936 in Cox Collection Series 7, folder 1 b, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library. For a discussion of the legal status of tenant farmers and sharecroppers see A.B. Book, "A Note on the Legal Status of Share-Tenants and Sharecroppers," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 4 (October, 1937): 421-526.

report speculated that the reasons for evictions were membership in the STFU and the new payment proposals of the AAA.<sup>16</sup>

Concurrent with the cotton picker strike conducted by the STFU in 1935, and increasing union agitation for investigations of violations of AAA contracts, violence, repression, and wholesale evictions raged throughout Northeast Arkansas. Planters and their riding bosses disrupted union meetings with gunfire and threats. Thugs threw dynamite sticks into an evicted sharecropper encampment; local law officers imprisoned union speakers. In the spring of 1935, Norman Thomas visited Northeast Arkansas. As he was being introduced to a meeting of the STFU at Birdsong, a group of riding bosses interrupted the meeting, dragged Thomas from the platform, and escorted him outside. Vigilantes drove Thomas from town and beat some of his companions. "We don't need no Gawddamn Yankee bastard to tell us what to do with our niggers," explained a riding boss.<sup>17</sup>

As sharecroppers from Northeast Arkansas lost their homes, they inundated relief offices in Arkansas and in Memphis. Amberson wrote the Resettlement Administration (RA) and the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) requesting a program to aid the evicted Arkansas sharecroppers. He talked in person with Will Alexander of FERA who greeted Amberson's requests with cool aloofness and pleaded inability to help due to current projects. Amberson soon realized that identification with the union militated against help from any of the federal relief organizations. The aid given by the Arkansas ERA was controlled by the local cotton aristocracy. Cotton baron domination of local relief administration ensured that local relief workers directed benefits to their

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<sup>16</sup> William R. Amberson, "Present Status of Legal Action in Defense of Tenants and Share-Croppers Threatened with Eviction," Cox Collection, Series 7, folder 2 i, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library.

<sup>17</sup> Sherwood Eddy to "Dear Friend," 18 March 1936, Arthur Raper Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. Holley, 82-86, the quote is taken from page 86; Mitchell, 128-129, Grubbs, 73-75, 85, 89, 102-103, 104-106.

best croppers and tenants; union members were ignored. In late 1935, C. H. Dibble, a plantation owner near Parkin, Arkansas, ordered almost 100 sharecropper families off his property.

The influx of newly dispossessed and the continuing pressure from those already evicted inspired in Amberson the notion of a cooperative farm.<sup>18</sup> In late 1935, Sam Franklin, on furlough from his YMCA assignment in Japan contacted Amberson and expressed some interest in the condition of the sharecroppers. Amberson told Franklin of his plans to establish a cooperative farm for the benefit of evicted sharecroppers. The idea appealed to Franklin and he arranged to visit with Amberson in Memphis. Franklin's boss, Sherwood Eddy, also expressed interest in the project and funded Franklin's exploratory trip to the Bluff City. En route to Memphis, Franklin visited the Division of Subsistence Housing Arthurdale project in West Virginia. In view of the enormous expenditure of federal funds on the project, Franklin assumed that similar government funding would be made available for other promising projects. Amberson, better informed by his correspondence and conversation with various New Deal officials, quickly disabused Franklin of that notion.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Amberson to Oscar Johnston, October 21, 1934, Cox Collection Series 7, folder 2a; Amberson letter to Oscar Johnston, November 23, 1934, Amberson to Hiram Norcross, November 23, 1934, both in Cox Collection, folder 2b; Amberson to Clarence Senior, February 4, 1936, Amberson to Senior, February 4, 1936 both in Cox Collection, folder 1b; Amberson to S.N. Vann, Arkansas Emergency Relief Administration, December 31, 1934, Cox Collection folder 2c; Amberson to Sam Franklin, summary of conversation with Will Alexander, November 19, 1936, Brooks Hayes, Resettlement Administration, to Amberson, July 29, 1937, Cox Collection, folder 2g; Sam Franklin to Amberson, December 28, 1935, February 13, 1936, February 14, 1936; Amberson to Franklin February 11, and February 26, 1935, all in Cox Collection, House Box 1, 1996 Accession, unlabeled folder, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library.

<sup>19</sup> For information on Franklin's visit, his interest in cooperative farming, and Amberson's information relative to the possibility of federal assistance, see Amberson, Franklin, and Senior correspondence cited above.

Franklin had experienced what Amberson viewed as the practical solution to sharecropping, cooperative farming. Franklin met with Amberson, Mitchell, and East in February 1936 in Amberson's Memphis home. There seemed to be an immediate connection. Franklin's experience in working with Japanese collective farms and his intelligence, energy, and enthusiasm impressed Amberson. While he was interviewing Franklin, Amberson still saw the creation of a cooperative farm as a function of the Socialist Party. In a 20 February 1936, letter to Senior, Amberson revealed his thinking. He detailed his efforts in the field to provide relief to the dispossessed and his search for a suitable place for a "genuine cooperative farm." Amberson proposed that Franklin head the venture. As no funding was likely to be forthcoming from New Deal relief and resettlement agencies, Amberson suggested that the Socialist Party itself help to establish the proposed cooperative. The letter complained about WPA officials warning Franklin to stay away from the union and that the WPA claimed that they were taking care of the evicted families. Furthermore, evicted union sharecroppers received no relief while relief officials gave the cotton barons' best tenants preferential treatment.<sup>20</sup>

Early in 1936, Amberson and Franklin began planning the cooperative venture. Amberson and Franklin toured Northeast Arkansas and Franklin urged Sherwood Eddy to come and see the conditions for himself. In early March, 1936, Eddy and Franklin visited the tent cities of evicted sharecroppers. Threatened with jail if they did not immediately leave, these two ministers were arrested and jailed for several hours by Parkin, Arkansas, police for the crime of being outside agitators. After this experience, Franklin, a farm boy

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<sup>20</sup> Cox Collection Series 7, folder 1b, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library.



from rural Tennessee, decided that he would stay in his native South and help the sharecroppers rather than return to Japan.<sup>21</sup>

Eddy enthusiastically embraced Amberson's proposal to purchase a large tract of land. He was willing, he told Amberson, to finance the farm by committing a charitable trust fund at his disposal. STFU Executive Secretary H. L. Mitchell suggested that they buy land in Arkansas but Eddy insisted, "We could not hope to raise crops upon literal dynamite."<sup>22</sup> Although Mitchell warned that starting a cooperative farm in Mississippi rather than Arkansas was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire, Eddy and Franklin began touring parts of three states in the Mississippi Delta in search of appropriate property. In March 1936, in the last hours of an apparently futile three-day search, a real estate broker directed Eddy and Franklin to a 2,138-acre tract near Hill House in Bolivar County, Mississippi. Eddy had to fly back to New York, having missed scheduled rail connections from Memphis. He considered the last minute revelation of this segment of Goshen as miraculous and often invoked notions of the supernatural manifestation in his periodic fund-raising appeals. Along with a few mules, rude cabins, and some farm equipment, Eddy purchased the property for \$17,500. Slightly over 600 acres of the property was cotton-ready; the remaining 1,500-acres was unevenly divided between cypress swamp and ridge lands. Eddy proposed, and the hastily formed Board of Trustees agreed, that profits of the cooperative amortize the loan at an interest rate of 2.5%. The funds that Eddy committed were residual funds from another humanitarian effort. At the end of the Great War, Eddy, and businessman James Causey, later a director of the farms, had begun an effort to raise \$500,000 in order to feed refugees in

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<sup>21</sup> Arthur Raper, "Notes on Trip to Hillhouse, Mississippi and Eastern Arkansas, 1936; Sherwood Eddy to "Dear Friend," 18 March 1936, both in Arthur Raper Papers. Franklin, 8-10.

<sup>22</sup> Franklin, "Early Years," 23.

the French occupied Ruhr. William H. Timken of Canton, Ohio, had made a \$20,000 contribution. U.S. Government intervention made the fund unnecessary and Timken advised Eddy to use the money wherever Eddy thought it would do the most good. Years later, Amberson castigated Eddy and Franklin for their hasty and rash decision in purchasing the Bolivar County property. Eddy was acting with perfect consistency; he was also the first contributor to Myles Horton for the establishment of Highlander Folk School, a radical labor and social institution, in Monteagle, Tennessee.<sup>23</sup>

Five original members formed Cooperative Farms, Incorporated. They were Reinhold Niebuhr, president, Sherwood Eddy, William Amberson, Sam Franklin, Jr., and John Rust. A few weeks later, sociologist Arthur Raper and Bishop William Scarlett of the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri joined the board. The board named Sam Franklin, Resident Director of the cooperative project and Blaine Treadway as Associate Director.<sup>24</sup>

Both Rust and Treadway were appointed to the board for decidedly utilitarian reasons. John and Mack Rust had invented a mechanical cotton picker. Originally from Texas, the brothers had found support and cooperation from the Newllano Colony in Louisiana. John Rust, recognizing that a successful cotton picker would further shrink the demand for agricultural labor, expressed his intention to donate the profits of the sale of his invention to eleemosynary organizations, particularly those serving dispossessed

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<sup>23</sup>Letter to "Dear Folks from Sherwood Eddy, 19 March 1936; Delta and Providence Farm Papers #3473, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC, (hereinafter "Delta and Providence Papers." This letter informs the interested people of H.H. Timkin's donation. According to Eddy, Timken refused to accept repayment because he had already deducted 15% from his tax obligation. Amberson to A.E. Cox, January 17, 1973, Cox Collection, House Box 1, 196 Accession, William R. Amberson Trustee Folder, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library. Thomas Bledsoe, *Or We'll All Hang Separately: The Highlander Idea* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 22. Franklin, 8-13; Mitchell, 132; Dunbar, 116-117.

<sup>24</sup>"The Delta Cooperative Farm," letterhead stationary, letter dated November 4, 1936 from Sam Franklin to Amberson, Cox Collection House Box 1, 1996 Accession, unlabeled folder, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library. Sherwood Eddy, "The Delta Cooperative's First Year," *The Christian Century*, 54 (3 February, 1937), 139-140.

farm workers. According to Sherwood Eddy, the Rust brothers had committed 90% of all profits from the development, production, and sale of the mechanical cotton picker to a foundation, the principal purpose of which was to ameliorate the economic distress of displaced agricultural workers. Specifically, nine-tenths of cotton picker profits were to be invested in a series of cooperative farms, cooperative stores, and educational projects for black and white. Eddy was awed by the Rust brothers' potential generosity. "If this is done," he wrote of the proposed donation of future profits,

it will be the first time in history, as far as I know, when a major mechanical invention has been completely socialized in a capitalistic country and harnessed to human welfare, and where virtually all the profit of the investors goes to the relief of human labor which would suffer because of the machine. Already I can see our new cotton picker invention going down the broad acres of our cooperative farm with the people prosperous and happy and their children in school. <sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, he planned to demonstrate his perfected cotton picker at Delta Cooperative Farm. There is no evidence that Rust channeled any funds to the Delta Cooperative Farms. He did establish a charitable foundation in 1951. In a paper he delivered to a local historical society, "The Origin and Development of the Cotton Picker," Rust recounted his tribulations and final success with the cotton picker. He mentioned with fondness the support he received from the radicals at the Newllano Colony in Louisiana. There was not a single mention of the Delta or Providence Cooperative Farms. There is no record of the effect of 90% of the profits derived from the delivery of the single most important item of cotton technology since the cotton gin. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sherwood Eddy, to "Dear Friend," Strictly Personnel and Confidential, 18 March 1936, Arthur Raper Papers.

<sup>26</sup> Sherwood Eddy, *Ibid*; Alva W. Taylor, "Rust Brothers Open New Path," *The Christian Century* (April 22, 1936); John Rust, "The Origin and Development of the Cotton Picker," unpublished narrative, copy in University of Memphis Archives, MSS 115, WTHS Manuscripts, Rust Collection, 1933-1953, Box 1, Folder 1.

Dr. Amberson planted Blaine Treadway, a true-believer secular socialist, at Delta Cooperative Farm. Amberson recommended forcefully that Franklin secure Treadway's appointment as associate director. Prior to learning that Eddy would provide funding for the cooperative effort, Amberson had targeted Treadway as the likely head of a cooperative effort, but since the Christian Socialists provided the money, they selected the top leadership. Treadway and Amberson viewed the "social gospel" advocates with a cautious suspicion. In particular, they suspected that Eddy, Niebuhr, and Franklin did not understand or appreciate the necessity of full democracy in carrying out farm operations, nor did they understand the importance of full disclosure of the Farm's financial affairs. Finally, both Amberson and Treadway believed that the true hope for cooperative agriculture and the restoration of a prosperous life lay in a strong class-consciousness among the membership. Franklin and Eddy, on the other hand, saw economic and social redemption as a function of the effects of practical religion. Class-consciousness and economic and political motivation had no place in the restored Kingdom of God in the land.<sup>27</sup>

Treadway, a bachelor, and Franklin, providentially and only temporarily separated from his wife, Dorothy, moved into a two-room shotgun cabin along the main road that traversed the farm; from there they began directing the frenetic work of the first year of

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<sup>27</sup> Sam Franklin to Amberson, December 28, 1935, February 13, 1936, February 14, 1936; Amberson to Franklin February 11, and February 26, 1935, all in Cox Collection, House Box 1, 1996 Accession, unlabeled folder, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library. Amberson to Senior, February 4, 1936, Cox Collection Series 7, folder 1b, Special Collections Mitchell Memorial Library. For information concerning Amberson's suspicions and his relationship with Treadway see letters from and to Amberson, Treadway, and James A. McDonald, 1940-1941 in the STFU papers, (reels 14, 15, 18 19) and in the Cox Collection, Series 7. These letters are significant because they comment "after the fact." The letters, although retained and included in the papers of the STFU and the Cox collection are personal communications. There is no indication that any of the correspondents is marshaling evidence to present a case to condemn or defend anyone. The letters seem to be an honest discussion of how these individuals viewed the operations and happenings on the cooperative farms.

the cooperative. As operations commenced on the property, Franklin gave existing tenants an opportunity to stay on; only three of eight families did. The evicted Arkansas sharecroppers, most of them from the Dibble plantation, began arriving in late March and by August 1936, thirty-one families, twelve white and nineteen black, had taken positions on the farm. At first, some of the new arrivals had to double up or live in tents. The necessity of immediate planting in order to harvest a fall crop and constructing cabins for newly arriving families required Herculean efforts by Franklin, Treadway, and the members. In addition to the necessary tasks, farm staff and membership were inconvenienced by accommodating the host of visitors brought to the farm by the generous publicity the cooperative generated.<sup>28</sup>

In the first year of cooperation, the Delta Cooperative Farm members established a sawmill, built houses for all families, cleared some new land, and despite the late start and one of the worst droughts in years, produced 152 bales of cotton. The drought reduced the cotton yield but it also made the cypress timber more accessible. Sherwood Eddy informed the "Dear Friends" network of existing and potential donors that the Farm built new cabins at flat cost of \$33.00 per unit. They did have screened windows and sanitary outhouses, but none of the modern attributes of the Dyess Colony houses. Arthur Raper visited Dyess and envied the Colonists pristine wired and piped homes; housing at Dyess was far superior to the cabins at Delta Cooperative Farm. Sherwood Eddy gave an encouraging account of the first year in *The Christian Century*. According to Eddy, the trustees held a "\$30,000 farm fully paid for and free from debt." Thirty families were settled on the farm, and the members had been able to pay the trustees \$1,000 toward

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<sup>28</sup>E. B. McKinny, 1<sup>st</sup> Vice President, Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, 14 March 1934, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill, "Report on How I Found Things at Hill House Miss. W. Clarence Edwards, "Cooperative Farming: Hillhouse, Mississippi," *The Epworth Highroad*, 6 (February 1937), 5; Franklin, 13-16; Eddy, 139.

amortization of the land. In addition, they had been able to distribute among themselves \$8,909 in dividends, or \$327.53 per family. Each family also received an average of \$122.29 in certificates for the labor involved with cabin construction and clearing fields. Thus, at a time when the average income of the southern tenant farmer family was \$212 (\$3,808) per year, the Delta Cooperative Farm families earned, in cash and deferred certificates, \$449.82 (\$6,545).<sup>29</sup>

Eddy continued with even more glorious examples of the results of cooperative farming. The farm had sold \$4,000 worth of timber from its saw mill operation and put another \$1,000 worth of timber into houses, a community center capable of seating several hundred, and recreational and educational facilities. During the first year the cooperative had commenced hog and poultry operations and a dairy operation was underway. The cooperative store, called Rochdale in honor of the cooperative established by English mill workers in 1843, declared a dividend of nine per cent.<sup>30</sup>

In the conclusion of the *Christian Century* article Eddy stated, without elaboration, that the two races had been cooperating on the basis of interracial justice. Acknowledging that the experiment had begun in violence, he noted that "thus far we have been grateful for the cooperation of many in our adopted state of Mississippi." The directors, he told his readers, were already planning for a second cooperative farm.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Meditations From Mississippi." *Christian Century*, 54 (6) (February 10, 1937), 182-184; Sherwood Eddy, "The Delta Cooperative Farm: First Report of Progress," 19 April 1936, Delta and Providence Farm Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, herein after, Delta Farm Papers; Arthur F. Raper, "Notes on Trip to Hillhouse, Mississippi and Eastern Arkansas, 1936," typescript hand annotated narrative, Arthur Franklin Raper Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Manuscripts Department, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, herein after, Arthur Raper Papers; Eddy, "The Delta Cooperative's First Year," 138-140.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid; Franklin, "The Early Years", 16-22.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

Reinhold Niebuhr's "Meditations From Mississippi," also published in *Christian Century*, was just as enthusiastic but more philosophical in its praise. Unlike Eddy, Niebuhr made a veiled allusion that all was not perfect in this Mississippi paradise. Some of the members did not find satisfaction on the farm:

Undoubtedly they have worked harder than an average sharecropper. No wonder that a few yearn for the fleshpots of Egypt, though these fleshpots contained nothing but fat-back and cornmeal. One Negro left last week with the remark, "I need a rest."<sup>32</sup>

These articles, and others, brought tremendous attention to the Delta Cooperative Farm. Liberals praised the farm as the Christian example of service toward economic emancipation. Eleanor Roosevelt asked Eddy to visit her and discuss the farm. Other inquirers and admirers included Rexford G. Tugwell, Henry Wallace, North Carolina Senator Frank Graham and Jacob Coxey of 1894 Coxey's Army fame. Indeed, the publicity was so massive that Eddy wrote to Franklin in 1939, "We have received more publicity than we deserved. When our American Seminar saw [Louis] Brandeis, after an hour with him in his home he said, 'I did not want to talk with you about these things, I wanted to spend the time asking you about your cooperative farms in Mississippi.'"<sup>33</sup> Not all the publicity was positive. Writer Jonathan Daniels argued that the farm was living on

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<sup>32</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Meditations From Mississippi." *Christian Century*, 54 (6) (February 10, 1937), 182-184.

<sup>33</sup> Sherwood Eddy to Sam Franklin, 19 September 1939, Papers of Delta Cooperative Farm. Franklin, 59.

charity, an accusation that Amberson would second along with dishonesty and paternalism before the decade was out.<sup>34</sup>

Ostensibly, the management of the farm was delegated to a council of five members, no more than three of each race, elected by the membership. This council made the decisions regarding agricultural operations, logging operations, design and construction of farm structures, and matters of discipline. The council had the authority to remove families or individuals from cooperative membership, but all council decisions were subject to veto by Sam Franklin. The first significant decision of the council was the placement of family houses. The council decided that all families would reside in relatively close proximity to each other, and that the black and white residences would be placed facing each other, separated by the main road.<sup>35</sup>

Gradually, residents and friends of the cooperative began to call the entire operation by the name of its consumers' cooperative, Rochdale. In 1937, the Postal Service established a new post office, Rochdale, and named newly-arrived Alan Eugene (Gene) Cox Postmaster. People soon began to refer to the Delta Cooperative Farm by different labels; Rochdale, Delta Cooperative Farm, Sherwood Eddy's operation, or the Union Farm.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Franklin, 17-18; Mitchell, 134; Dunbar, 119; Jonathan Daniels, *A Southerner Discovers the South* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1938), 138.

<sup>35</sup> Franklin, 19-22.

<sup>36</sup> John J. Hart, Secretary-Treasurer, National Association of Postmaster of the United States, letter to Honorable Alan E. Cox, Postmaster, Rochdale, Mississippi; "New Name Added to Map: Grows from Co-Op Farm," unidentified and undated newspaper clipping. Both in Cox Collection, House Box 1, 1996 Accession, Post Office Rochdale, MS folder. The farm name was officially changed to Delta Cooperative Farm by the Farm Council on 20 April 1936. Until that date the Council Minutes referred to the "Sherwood Cooperative Farm No. 1.", Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, Council Papers, Box 18, SHC, Chapel Hill.



Medical attention for newly arrived sharecroppers, and indeed for the families in the community, was almost non-existent. During the early days of the cooperative, Amberson prevailed on a physician friend, Dr. Garland Weidner, to drive down from Memphis on Sundays and conduct a clinic. Memphis was 100 miles from the farm and Weidner was no help in case of an emergency. Dr. Etta Vaughn a retired Osteopath volunteered her services and conducted clinics on a part-time basis. She returned to her native California in the summer of 1937. Lindsey Hail, the child of missionaries who had served in Japan, became acquainted with the Franklins and, upon completion of her R.N. training at Massachusetts General Hospital, accepted Franklin's offer to provide medical services to the farm and community. Although Franklin could not guarantee her a salary, and even though she had never been in the South, she came to Delta Cooperative Farm. Nine months later, she married A. E. Cox.<sup>37</sup>

Franklin and Eddy realized that the services of one nurse, no matter how dedicated, could not meet the needs of the farm or of the rural community. In 1938, Franklin proposed that David Minter, recently graduated from the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, come to serve at Delta Cooperative Farm. Minter's father was a minister and his brother a missionary. Dr. Minter, in effect, became a missionary too. He agreed to open his practice at Rochdale for a salary of \$1,000 a year plus any fees he could collect from the community. In 1939, Dr. Minter met one of the college summer volunteers sponsored by the American Friends Service Committee, Sue Wooten, and they married in 1940.<sup>38</sup>

Delta Cooperative Farm experimented. In addition to cotton, members began raising alfalfa. The producers' cooperative began poultry, hog, beef, and dairying

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<sup>37</sup> Franklin 35-36; Daniels, 153; Mitchell, 134; Dallas, 291-292.

<sup>38</sup> Franklin, 67-68; Dallas, 292.

operations. The saw mill continued to provide a steady stream of income and members irrigated the cooperative garden. Members generally were able to improve and add variety to their diets. The consumer cooperative provided products without the usurious interest rates that the former sharecroppers had experienced in cotton baron commissaries.

The producers' cooperative compensated workers on a graded and somewhat complicated scale. Members fell into one of eleven work-scale classifications according to the skill level required for the job. Each job carried specific credits and the credits determined the distribution from the profits of the enterprises. The system also gave members credit for "non-productive" work. Such work included clearing new ground, building community facilities, ditching, and fencing. For these labors the members were paid in certificates, redeemable at the cooperative store.<sup>39</sup>

At the suggestion of white members, the cooperative established a school for the black children of the farm and the nearby community. At the time, the state of Mississippi provided white children eight months of education but only four and one-half months for black children. Seeing a basic injustice in the state's educational system, a majority of the white members petitioned the council to establish such a school. The cooperative received financial contributions from various black and interracial groups to fund the teacher's salary for an additional four months of school.<sup>40</sup>

The Cooperative Farm's goals were ambitious. Franklin, some said unwisely, put as much time and effort into achieving spiritual, social, and educational goals as he did to

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<sup>39</sup> Ellis and Hirsbert, Certified Public Accountants "Statement of Operations, Producers Cooperative, Delta Cooperative Farms," years 1936, 1937, 1938, and 1939; annual letters to the "Members and Trustees, Delta Cooperative Farm, Rochdale, MS, University of Memphis, Mississippi Valley Historical Collection, MSS 15, Delta Cooperative Farms.

<sup>40</sup> Franklin, 55.

achieving economic ones. Franklin conducted church services every Sunday. Only occasionally did black and white meet together. Franklin recognized the wisdom in yielding to some of the more adamant regional customs. Speakers, sometimes very prominent ones, including Arthur Raper and Bishop William Scarlett, came to the Farm. Lessons in home economics, book reviews, and, with the gift of a projector, movies, became part of the regular fare in the community building.

Beginning in the summer of 1937, college students, both black and white, came to the farm for volunteer work. The YMCA, YWCA, and the Quakers' American Friends Service Committee were most instrumental in student recruitment. These volunteers built bridges, cared for children, cleared fields, chopped cotton, cooked, and fell in love. Franklin and Cox recall several marriages between sons and daughters of members and among the summer college volunteers. Minter and Cox both met their spouses during service at the Farm.

The American Friends Service Committee expected that the young people sent to the Farm would not only labor and serve; they would also learn. Part of Sam Franklin's reciprocal responsibility was to expose the volunteers to some of the people and peculiarities of the Delta. W.A. Percy's secretary sent Mr. Percy's regrets. Mr. Percy was abroad on vacation, he said. There is no record of Oscar G. Johnston's response to Franklin's invitation to come down to the Farm and talk to the young people about the cotton industry. Even without the services of two of the Delta's most luminous personalities, Franklin was able to provide an impressive lecture lineup. Norman Thomas, Miles Horton, Charles Johnson, Sherwood Eddy, Jacob Coxey, Reinhold Niebuhr, and the occasional journalist came to the Farm to speak to the volunteers. The visitors also served a valuable purpose in that their presence often drew local white people to visit the Farm. Such familiarity, so the Board expected, would create and maintain good will with the community. People from all stations in life, it seemed, wanted to visit the Farm and many of them offered their volunteer services. Except for an

exceptional few, Sam Franklin asked, instead, for money. Among the remarkable people to offer services to Delta Cooperative Farm were the merely famous, the widely influential, and the truly extraordinary.<sup>41</sup>

A. James McDonald ultimately proved too good to be true from Sam Franklin's perspective. McDonald, a lawyer admitted to practice in Louisiana was awaiting the disposition of his "case" as he corresponded with William Amberson. McDonald lived in a ten by ten addition to a sharecropper's cabin, but he did have access to electricity. He delicately balanced a substantial library, portable typewriter, hot plate, and his meager personal items between a cot and overstuffed chair. The lawyer was a member of the Llano Colony and was awaiting some sort of legal adjudication; he was, he told Amberson, "marking time." He advised Amberson based on his Llano experiences and in early 1938, he arrived at Delta Cooperative Farm and assumed responsibilities as the Farm Secretary. McDonald organized the files, wrote a column for the Farm's Newsletter, "The Co-Op Call," and was an effective apologist for the Socialist Party of America. He was also a competent stenographer; he took shorthand. When in 1939 the Cooperators held a meeting at which they were encouraged to express their opinions without the intimidation of the management staff, McDonald recorded and transcribed into type the proceedings. The evidence of what the members actually thought revealed Sam Franklin's dictatorial and insensitive farm management.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Sam Franklin to W.A. Percy, 7 July 1937; Franklin to Oscar Johnston, 7 July 1937; Mitchell Finor (?), Secretary to W.A. Percy to Franklin, 9 July 1937; Franklin to Charlie Mae Carter, 22 September, 1937; all in Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, SHC. "Sherwood Cooperative Farm No.1, 5 April 1936," hand-written minutes of Farm Council, Delta Cooperative Farm, Council Meeting Papers, Box 18, SHC., hereinafter Council Meeting Papers.

<sup>42</sup> For correspondence between McDonald and Amberson see the William Amberson Papers and the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farm Papers, both in the SHC, Chapel Hill. Letter from James A. McDonald to the Trustees, Cooperative Farms, Incorporated, 11 February 1939; to the Trustees, Cooperative Farms, Incorporated, 18 February 1939; "Copies of Letters Submitted at or in Connection with Meeting of Members of Delta

Constance H. Rumbough was truly extraordinary. Her life seems to have been segmented; few of her acquaintances in a particular segment of her variegated life seem to know the Constance Rumbough of the others. Sam Franklin announced the new addition to the staff with a flourish,

A recent addition to the staff members of the Farm is Miss Constance Rumbough, formerly a missionary (*sic*) of the Methodist Church, South, and more recently connected with the Emergency Peace Campaign. Miss Rumbough is from Virginia and is a blood relative of General Robert E. Lee. Her coming to the Farm is, I think, symbolical of the growing interest in our enterprise on the part of the best type of Southerners.<sup>43</sup>

Ms Rumbough's Virginia illustrious ancestry notwithstanding, she proved to be a versatile and effective staffer during her tenure at Delta Cooperative Farm from the spring of 1937 through at least November. At first, Franklin assigned the forty-three year old Longwood College *alumna* to answer correspondence. She worked in the Rochdale Cooperative Store and won praise from the manager for her industry and diligence. She did irritate some of the customers by writing their names on paper cups used at the water bucket. She assigned a place on a shelf for each Cooperator's cup. She could not abide, she said, the waste of throwing away perfectly good paper cups. She taught the black Sunday school and in desperation Sam Franklin assigned her to the poultry operation.

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Cooperative Farm Held on February 6, 1939;" "Report to the Board of Trustees of Cooperative Farms, Inc. by Sam H. Franklin, Jr. - February 22, 1939"; William R. Amberson "A Statement to the Board of Trustees Cooperative Farms, Inc., February 22, 1939 all in Delta Cooperative Farm Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

<sup>43</sup> "News Letter," to Dear Friends from Sam H. Franklin, Jr., 13 August 1937, Arthur Raper Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

She cleaned the roosting areas, gathered and cleaned the eggs, and watered and fed the chickens. According to Franklin, she put the poultry operation back in order.<sup>44</sup>

Rumbough used her extensive connections gained by missionary work to develop contributions to the Farm and gather advice for a project inspired by the Delta Cooperative Farm. Apparently, Rumbough moved to 501 Hooker Street, Jackson, Mississippi in early 1938 and began another segment in her variegated life. Using her Methodist connections, alliances earned as part of her service with the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and her formidable letter writing skills Rumbough promptly formed Mississippi Farms Incorporated. The Board of Directors included a remarkable number of the small universe of Mississippians of the wealth and worldview required for Rumbough's purposes. The directors of Mississippi Farms, including Constance Rumbough, Secretary, were prominent Mississippians, A.S. Cody, Jr., Owen Cooper, and Paul Ramsey. Non-director Stockholders included Mrs. W. L. Alford, Dr. Henry M. Bullock, and Will Watkins, Sr. Rumbough's vision and her will were impressive. Mississippi Farms bought almost 1,000, at \$5.00 per acre, acres of land near Hattiesburg, and began operations. Mississippi Farms was to have been the first in a series of farms sponsored by, possibly, the Methodist Missionary effort. The farms were to be sold to

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<sup>44</sup> Constance H. Rumbough to Mr. Vanderwood, 11 April 1964; Arthur F. Raper to Constance Rumbough, 25 March 1938; Arthur Raper to Constance Rumbough, 29 April 1938, all in Arthur Raper Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. Much of the information in this and following paragraphs comes from a nine-page letter written to Mr. Paul J. Vanderwood of Memphis. Vanderwood wrote several Delta Cooperative staffers in the early 1960s. Paul Vanderwood, an editor with the *Press Scimitar* was gathering material for a possible book. He never completed the project, but he left his hand-written notes in the Papers of the Delta Cooperative Farm, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

white and black small farmers, the payments used to purchase other plots for other farmers. Mississippi Farms resembled the organization of the Delta Cooperative Farm, but it was much more emphatic in its insistence that its clients don the role and responsibilities of ownership immediately. There would be no "probationary periods" at Mississippi Farms. It became apparent very quickly that the Mississippi Farm would be a failure, and Constance Rumbough refused to accept that consequence. Rumbough enlisted the aid of the Delta Farm Cooperative Store Manager, the Quaker Art Landes, and her older sister. The three of them repaid other investors and sold the farm on long terms to the best of their clients. The black farmer paid the full price over time, and raised five children, all of whom graduated from college. The Rumbough sisters and Landes did not sell the mineral rights. A few years later natural gas from the property provided a small monthly income for the trio of investors and the new owner.<sup>45</sup>

Constance H. Rumbough rejoined the Fellowship of Reconciliation in the 1940s. She was also active in the movement to protect the rights of conscientious objectors. In the early 1950s, Constance Rumbough moved back to her hometown. Although born in Lynchburg, Rumbough's family moved to Danville, Virginia, when Constance was about five. She moved back to Danville to be the Director of Religious Education for the Danville School System and to take care of her aging mother. Constance Rumbough taught in the Jr. High and High Schools in Danville; she taught, at one time or another, almost all the Danville public school students from the early 1950s until at least 1977.

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<sup>45</sup> Rumbough to Vanderwood, *Ibid.* "A New Southern Cooperative Farm: A Project by and For Mississippians," unsigned typescript, Delta Cooperative Farm Papers. Rumbough to Raper, 19 April 1938; Arthur Raper to Rumbough, 25 March 1938; Rumbough to Raper, 26 May 1939, all in Delta Cooperative Farm Papers.

Hundreds of Danville residents remember Miss Constance Rumbough. They remember her as a tall, angular, white-haired lady who taught them about the history of the Children of Israel. Gary Grant, Danville businessman and regional historian, knew Rumbough and he remembers her distinctly and specifically with regard to one incident and one idea. Rumbough delivered the news of President John F. Kennedy's assassination to Grant's seventh grade class. Her solemnity, yet serenity and compassion in relating the news has been, says Grant, a model he has tried to implement on similar occasions. He also remembers that he first heard of and understood the notion of "progressive revelation" under the tutelage of Ms Rumbough. The Danville Library vertical file has no sources on Constance H. Rumbough. The history of Mt. Vernon Methodist Church makes no mention of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the Emergency Peace Campaign, work with conscientious objectors, or her work at Delta Cooperative Farm. People were surprised to know that the Misses Rumbough ever financed a bi-racial Mississippi cotton farm. Constance Rumbough seems to have been a most modest person."<sup>46</sup>

Despite the glowing reports in magazines and the status as a "pet" of liberals, things were not going as well as they seemed down on the farm. Slowly, but inexorably, the true financial condition of the Delta Cooperative Farm manifested itself. The "buckshot" soil of the farm, thick and rich, was difficult to cultivate. It cracked in the hot summer sun and became impenetrable mud in rain. It was conducive only for cotton production. One of the farm's goals was to demonstrate the superiority of diversified farming. By 1937, the farm was losing money, and at the end of that year it faced a large

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<sup>46</sup> Telephone interviews with Mr. Gary Grant, Danville, Virginia, 17, 27, 31 March 2007. Notes of the conversations retained by author. The Peace Collection: The Papers of Melissa Graves; Records of the Emergency Peace Campaign; Papers of E. Raymond Wilson; Records of the Fellowship of Reconciliation; Papers of John Nevin Sayre; all in Special Collections, Swarthmore College.



operating deficit, met only by charitable contributions from individuals, churches, and foundations. Jonathan Daniels claimed that the farm's best crop was Yankee benevolence, not its produce. None of the financial reports issued to the members and trustees by Ellis and Hirsberg, Certified Public Accountants, noted any contributions. Unwisely, Franklin invested some of the reserves in a fanciful effort to establish a pecan grove. Amberson's advice notwithstanding, Franklin used the alleged dividends to shore up members' income rather than to accommodate new families. Amberson suggested that an investment in new members would result in more production and thus increased profits. None of these financial matters were communicated to the members. The only way a trustee, other than Franklin and Eddy, could know the true financial picture was to ask. The questioners had to be very direct and forceful.<sup>47</sup>

The racial harmony so lauded by Eddy, Niebuhr, and Franklin also became severely strained or, perhaps, it had never existed in the first place. Even while Franklin praised the surrounding community for its tolerance of this unusual cooperative experiment, the farm became the object of mistrust and fear for a large segment of the white community. A rumor circulated around Hill House. They were "'misterin' those niggers out there."<sup>48</sup> H.L. Mitchell advised Franklin at the onset of operations that honorifics would cause trouble. It was a violation of local mores for whites to address blacks with titles of respect. He suggested that all personnel, including the staff, be

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<sup>47</sup> Report of Meeting of Members of Delta Cooperative Farm, held Monday, February 6, 1939, for Discussion of Farm Affairs, by A. James McDonald, Office Secretary, Arthur Raper Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill. Franklin, 55-58; Letters from Amberson to Franklin, 1937, 1938, Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, House Box 1, 1996 Accession. The exact economic status of the Farms was problematic. For the confusion, suspicion, and deception see a series of letters and reports between and among, A. James McDonald, Blaine Treadway, William Amberson, Sherwood Eddy, Arthur Raper, Charles Johnson, and Sam Franklin, Arthur Raper Papers.

<sup>48</sup> Franklin, 87.

referred to on a first name basis, or addressed as "Sister," "Brother," or "Comrade."

Amberson concurred with Mitchell's views. Franklin's speech to the Cleveland, Mississippi Rotary Club concerning the Farm caused some concern in the community. W. M. Kethley, President of Delta State Teachers College, read an article in the local newspaper and wrote his friend, Mississippi native Francis Harmon, General Secretary of the YMCA, to warn him about the activities of Franklin, one of his former staffers. According to Kethley, Franklin advocated "the organization of labor." Kethley also added, "The attendant loose talk also runs along bad lines: social equality and what have you. If I were in your place and could afford to do so, I would take a vacation [of a few days {hand-written addition}] and spend some of my time at Hillhouse." Kethley softened his letter with a hand written post-script: "Nothing so urgent and serious as to cause you loss of sleep - but you ought to get hold of this soon -"<sup>49</sup>

Amberson, Mitchell, Eddy, and Franklin had all envisioned a series of cooperative farms, whose success, they hoped, would actuate a change from cotton tenancy to large-scale cooperatives. In 1938, Cooperative Farms Incorporated purchased 2,880 acres in Holmes County, about eighty miles from Delta Cooperative Farm. The Holmes County purchase was consistent with that vision. The farm had been called "Providence" by its former owners, and the name remained. Sam and Dorothy Franklin moved to Providence while Blaine Treadway and Gene Cox stayed at Delta. Dr. Minter and Lindsey Cox made weekly trips to Providence and conducted clinics for members and for anyone else desiring their services. Significantly, Amberson abstained during the trustees' vote to buy another farm.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup>W.M. Kethley to Francis Harmon, October 8, 1936, University of Memphis Archives, MVHC, MSS 16, Delta Cooperative Farm. The spelling of Hill House is problematic. Many letters from those familiar with the area write Hillhouse, others Hill House. The Farm stationery used the Hill House spelling.

<sup>50</sup>Franklin. "Minutes of The Trustees of the Cooperative Farms, Inc., January 1, 1938." Cox Collection, Series 7, folder Delta Cooperative Farm History Folder.

### The Schism between Ecclesiastical and Scientific Socialists

The veiled information given in Niebuhr's *Christian Century* article indicated that all was not well. To the outside world, the Cooperative Farms presented a model of racial harmony, liberal society, economic success, and potential solution to the evils of farm tenancy. Archival evidence indicates that, in all of the areas mentioned above, there existed conflict, contradictions, paternalism, and subterfuge. The Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms were created with contradictory ideals and operational philosophies. By accepting funding from Sherwood Eddy, the Socialist Party lost any chance of becoming the dominant ideological partner. William Amberson, however, was an idealist with a broad streak of pragmatism. Recognizing that identification with Niebuhr, Eddy, and the liberal Christian community they represented placed the Cooperative Farms in a position to gain political and economic support from people who viewed the SFTU as anathema, he was content to allow the Cooperative Farms to be associated with liberal Christianity. Consequently, in only one of the articles extolling the success and virtues of the cooperative effort was there any mention that the farms were originally the brain-child and "arm" of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Even Amberson, in an article in *The Christian Register*, referred to the farm as Eddy's effort.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> William R. Amberson, "The New Deal for Sharecroppers," *The Christian Register* (March 18, 1937): 178-180. There is one article that does co-identify the farms with the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union: Jonathan Mitchell, "Cabins in the Cotton," *The New Republic* (September, 25, 1937): 175-177.

The Socialist Party of America, while rigorously publicizing its critique of American capitalism and aggressively promoting its political candidates, understood that some of its humanitarian and social efforts suffered by identification with the party. Indeed, the party was so sensitive to the deleterious effects of association with Marxist ideology that spokesmen often aggressively denied any such connection. H. L. Mitchell repeatedly denied in public that the STFU was in any way connected with the Socialist Party. STFU spokesman Howard "Buck" Kester, in his highly emotional and effective book, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers*, wrote: "It should be said furthermore, that the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union is not, nor ever has been, an adjunct or organ of either the Socialist Party or the Communist Party." H.L. Mitchell advised STFU leadership that they should "appear as gentle as lambs," but he privately wrote to Kester, "If we can build the union, we will take over all the damn plantations" and he hoped that the whole South would "come under the collectivist farm system."<sup>52</sup>

That the STFU was organized as an arm of the Socialist Party is beyond reasonable doubt. The archival evidence strongly suggests that the Socialist Party, under the direction of Amberson, originated the efforts which resulted in the Delta Cooperative Farm. Internal communications of the STFU and scattered papers of the Socialist Party of America clearly indicate that the party leadership considered the Delta Cooperative Farm as much an arm of the Socialist Party as the STFU itself. The STFU office manager, Evelyn Smith, in particular, co-identified the STFU, Delta Cooperative Farm, and the Socialist Party of America. Amberson was quite willing to allow Eddy, Franklin, and Niebuhr to serve as the "mouthpiece" for the Delta Cooperative Farm.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Mitchell, 47-48; Howard Kester, *Revolt Among the Sharecroppers* (New York: Arno Press and *The New York Times*, 1969), 54; Mitchell to Howard Kester, March 22, 1936, STFU papers, Reel 3.

<sup>53</sup> For evidence with reference to the STFU's attitude and Amberson's concept of the Delta Cooperative Farm, see: STFU Papers, especially reels 2, 3, 5, 6; Cox Collection, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University; William Amberson Papers,

Franklin gave some support to Socialist distinctions. Franklin began his letters to certain correspondents with greetings to his "Dear Comrade." At Amberson's insistence, he joined the Socialist Party of America and helped conduct a labor school under Socialist Party auspices in the summer of 1937. Despite these favors and despite Franklin's assurances that all the residents of Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms would be strongly encouraged to maintain membership in the STFU, the Socialist Party lost all control and most of its influence over the management and development of the cooperative farms. Christian Socialists inexorably eradicated Socialist Party influence and stymied Amberson's hope for a vibrant and self-disciplined political action group. The story presented by the Delta Cooperative Farm management to America was misleading, and at, times mendacious.<sup>54</sup>

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MSVC, University of Memphis Library. From the letters in the archives, Evelyn Smith emerges as a most interesting person. She had heard of the STFU and in the very early days of its existence, she contacted H.L. Mitchell in Memphis from her home in New Orleans. She expressed an interest in providing clerical support for the Union for very modest compensation or, if necessary, gratis. Mitchell asked her to travel to Memphis for an interview but she replied that she did not have transportation or money for bus or train fare. Mitchell wired her enough money for travel to Memphis and hired her as office secretary. Over the months one can see Ms Smith develop from a somewhat naive young woman to an effective administrator, political operative, and humanitarian activist. As the months rolled on she began speaking and writing for the STFU. On many occasions people chose to bypass Executive Secretary H.L. Mitchell and President J.R. Butler and consult with Ms Smith. Her writing is superior to that of other STFU officials and she developed mutually respectful relationships with such important people as Gardner Jackson, Brooks Hayes, and Will Alexander. In addition to her professional leadership, she was also a nurturer. Often she provided room and board to itinerant social activists, even during those times when the Union was not able to pay her small salary. She was generous with her meager funds to the point that Amberson continually worried about her subsistence.

<sup>54</sup> For Franklin's membership in the Socialist Party of America, see Amberson to Franklin, July 30, 1936, Cox Collection, House Box 1, unlabeled folder.

In his *Christian Century* article, Sherwood Eddy proclaimed that, after the first year, the trustees owned a "\$30,000 farm fully paid for and free from debt." This statement was misleading at best. He implied that farm revenue had paid for the farm, and made no mention of the charitable contribution that had funded the purchase. Second, there is little to support the assertion that the farm was worth \$30,000 after its first year in operation. Third, the "dividends" (which generated the cash income to the tenants) were not paid from current earnings, but from contributions not included on the farm's balance sheet.

William Amberson became even more critical of the farm's policy and management. He deplored Sam Franklin's refusal to accept the decision of the council in disciplinary matters, and he was appalled at the inactivity of the local chapter of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union. Of the 35,000 alleged members of the STFU, only 125 were in Mississippi. The union had almost no success in organizing sharecroppers in Mississippi. The Socialist Party and the STFU expected the locals at Delta and Providence to be the vanguard of sharecropper organization, but Franklin repeatedly ignored the union's views and frequently overturned decisions of the farm council.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, Franklin attempted to keep the news of an "indignation meeting" held by Delta Farm blacks from the trustees. Loyalty to the cooperative among the members was diminishing. Beginning with the harvest of 1937, many of the black women of the cooperative hired themselves out as day laborers to adjacent planters, leaving husbands and children to gather the cooperative's crop. Franklin berated the women and refused to allow the council to consider the issue. He imposed a penalty on the women's work accounts, thus reducing their cash distributions. In response the black members of the cooperative held a meeting at which they expressed their indignation at

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<sup>55</sup> Sherwood Cooperative Farm No. 1 Council Meeting, Minutes, 5 April, 20 April, 30 April, 5 May, 1936, Delta Farm Papers, Council Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

Franklin's tyrannical actions and his intemperate language, as well as perceived discrimination in favor of the white members. Franklin instructed the staff to make no mention of the meeting or the issues raised to the board. Amberson's tolerance reached the breaking point when, in 1939, the Board of Trustees sent a draft of another fund-raising letter to the trustees for approval. The appeal, Amberson believed, was based on a deliberate misstatement of the cooperatives' finances.<sup>56</sup>

In February 1939, Amberson resigned from the board. In his resignation statement, he claimed that, despite public announcements to the contrary, the farm had actually lost money in every year of its existence. Both Amberson and Blaine Treadway viewed the statements regarding farm income in the various public appeal letters as deliberate misstatements designed to induce continuing financial contributions.<sup>57</sup>

Indeed, Blaine Treadway became so concerned with what he saw as financial reporting irregularities that he requested that the STFU conduct an audit of the farms. Amberson strongly advised against such an audit, claiming that Franklin would

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<sup>56</sup> STFU Papers, reel 3, "Unlabeled list of state, county, charter number, location, membership, totals, and secretary." For evidence of members' outside work and disillusionment with the farms see a series of letters between Blaine Treadway, A. James McDonald, and William Amberson, all in Cox Collection Series 7, folder 2h. Letter from Sherwood Eddy on behalf of the Trustees to "My dear Friend" requesting contributions of \$17,000, March 15, 1939, Cox Collection Series 7, folder "Delta Cooperative Farm Rochdale Folder. For charges of paternalism see A. James McDonald to William Amberson, April 20, 1939, Cox Collection, Series 7, folder 2h. For information concerning financial reporting irregularities see letters among Amberson, Treadway, and McDonald, University of Memphis, Amberson papers, box 10.

<sup>57</sup> Eddy, "The Delta Cooperative's First Year," Ellis and Hirsbert, "Statement of Operations." years 1936-39. Annual letters to the "Members and Trustees, Delta Cooperative Farm, Rochdale, MS; in MNHC, MSS 15, Delta Cooperative Farms, University of Memphis Library. Letter, James McDonald to William Amberson, July 16, 1940, Cox Collection, folder 2 h; Letter, Arthur F. Raper to A.E. Cox, January 5, 1972, Cox Collection, Sovereignty Commission Folder. "A Statement to the Board of Trustees Cooperative Farms, Inc.) February 22, 1939, by William Amberson, MVHC, MSS36, William Amberson Papers, Box 1, folder 1.

deliberately confuse the records and that the trustees would see to it that the farm was exonerated and would then use the “manipulated” report as evidence of its fiduciary integrity. Amberson was correct at least as far as the composition of the audit committee was concerned. Only two members of the STFU office were included on the committee, and the report was hailed by Franklin as proof that even the most vocal critics of the farms could find no malfeasance. It is interesting to note that, by the time of the 1939 audit, Franklin referred to the STFU as “critics” of the cooperative farm.<sup>58</sup>

There were other ways in which Amberson believed that the farms had abandoned the original socialist motivations. Franklin, he charged, was acting in the manner of a paternalistic despot. He had made no attempt to allow true democratic decision making and he had invested no time and effort in raising up indigenous leadership. Furthermore, Amberson alleged, the cooperative members were deliberately being kept uninformed as to business decisions and their overall economic status. In addition, Amberson asserted that Franklin, Eddy, and Niebuhr had abandoned all intentions of ever allowing the cooperative membership a way of actually owning the farms. Finally, Amberson claimed that a fund-raising appeal sent out over the signature of the directors contained deliberately misstated financial information. In his resignation statement, Dr. Amberson concluded:

I shall struggle no more with that dark spirit of untruth which is blighting every chance we ever had to make a success of this work. I cannot maintain the pace of your frenzied philanthropy. Never before have I seen with such blinding clarity the essential and irreconcilable conflict between the scientific and the ecclesiastical approach to social problems. Never

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<sup>58</sup>Series of letters between Amberson, Treadway, and McDonald: Cox collection, folder 2 h; Amberson Papers, MVHC, MSS 36, Box 8 , folder 1



before have I become so deeply committed to the scientific search for knowledge as opposed to all other methods.<sup>59</sup>

### The Death of a Vision

In 1942, the trustees sold Delta Cooperative Farm in order to concentrate their activities at Providence. War-time job opportunities lured many sharecroppers from the Mississippi Delta and farm mechanization made farm laborers expendable. The incidence of sharecropping in the Mississippi Delta decreased. Delta Cooperative Farm had never been self-supporting despite the publicity to the contrary. Cooperative Farms, Incorporated received \$34,600 for the Delta farm which had cost \$17,500. By 1942, the improvements made to the farm were significant. All the cabins had sanitary outhouses, and screens. A large community structure and attendant sheds and storage facilities had added considerable value to the original investment. But Franklin and Eddy, anxious to concentrate efforts at Providence, sold it too quickly. Two months later the new owner resold the farm to a levee contractor for \$47,000.<sup>60</sup>

War service claimed Dr. Minter and Sam Franklin. Franklin only returned to Mississippi for brief visits. Minter, after a refresher course at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, eventually came back to Providence. Gene Cox attempted to run Providence on a sound fiscal basis without sacrificing the cooperative's spiritual, educational, and medical missions. The cooperative bought a creamery and sent for Blaine Treadway to operate it. It failed, through no fault of the cooperative. The dairy's largest customer defaulted on its debt to the cooperative. Gradually, war industry opportunities siphoned off the members. Cox, Minter, and two or three families stayed on. After the war, Providence Farm was home to only two or three tenant families at a

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<sup>59</sup> Amberson, "A Statement to the Board of Trustees.."

<sup>60</sup> Ibid; Dallas, 305.

time. Cox devoted himself to providing Christian education and social activities for the community while Dr. Minter conducted his clinic. The Providence farm relied on contributions, not production for its sustenance

The dream of William R. Amberson, who was by now disillusioned with the advocates of "practical Christianity" and the social gospel, met an ignominious end. In 1955, a teen-aged white girl told her school-bus driver that some black boys had whistled at her while she was waiting on the bus. The bus driver quickly informed the Holmes County Sheriff and the four young black boys were brought in for questioning. The questions had less to do with whistling at the girl than they did with the activities down there at Providence Farm. Intimidated and terrified (Emmet Till had just been found murdered not far away) the boys' answers to extremely prejudicial and leading questions were recorded on tape. Because the tape-recorded answers "proved" that the people at Providence were promoting social equality, advocating racial integration, and countenanced interracial swimming, the community leaders, especially the local prosecutor, state representative, and the White Citizens Council, felt that the community should be made aware of such "goings on."

On a September evening a large crowd of Holmes County citizens met at the Tchula school to hear the taped "confessions." The citizens of Tchula, guided by the White Citizens Council, decided that Providence Cooperative Farm exerted a dangerous and unwholesome influence on the community in general and upon blacks in particular. The throng voted, near unanimously, that Gene Cox, the soul of propriety and compassion, advocate of the downtrodden, and almost (unlike Franklin) devoid of arrogance, leave the county. The vote also applied to David Minter. The one person who defended them before the crowd, sixty-year-old Presbyterian Minister Marsh Callaway of Durant, was soon asked by the Session of his church to leave. David Minter

moved to Arizona. Gene Cox moved to Memphis and continued his work with the Delta Foundation, a non-profit corporation established by the Coxes and Minters.<sup>61</sup>

On October 12, 1956, the Stockholders and Directors of Cooperative Farms, Inc., voted to sell Providence Farm to the Delta Foundation for "\$1.00 in cash and other considerations."<sup>62</sup> Will Campbell, author of the novel, *Providence*, said that the farm was eventually sold to private interests by the Delta Foundation. The cooperative farms did not achieve their goals, the Christian Socialists did not usher in an age of social justice and economic success, the Socialist Party did not transform sharecroppers of the Mississippi Delta to a rural socialist-vanguard, and Dr. Amberson's vision died.<sup>63</sup>

Discussion of the failures of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms must begin with the single most important fact relative to the creation of these farms, the acreage reduction programs of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration. AAA administrators were fully aware of the effect of their policies on sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta.

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<sup>61</sup> *The Presbyterian Outlook*, "Editorial" October 31, 1955. The account of the last years of Providence are taken from Franklin and W. L. Miller, "Some of Our Best Friends Are Mississippians," copy of an original draft of a story which later appeared as: "Trial by Tape Recorder," *The Reporter*, 13 (Dec. 15, 1955): 13-27, located at: University of Memphis MVHC, MSS 16, 35, Delta Cooperative Farm; Special Collections, Mitchell Memorial Library, Cox Collection.

<sup>62</sup> "Minutes of a Special Meeting of the Stockholders and Directors of Cooperative Farms, Incorporated" October 12, 1956 at 9:00 A.M., Cox Collection, House Box 1, 1996 Accession, Cooperative Farms Incorporated Minutes Folder.

<sup>63</sup> Telephone conversation with author, October 9, 2001. The information concerning the Delta Foundation comes from a portion of an un-titled manuscript giving a brief summary of the Providence Farm. Seven pages exist and it cannot be determined how many pages are missing. The document has a typewritten notion [Signed] "Coxes and Minters." Cox Collection, House Box 1, 1996 Accession; History, Farms 8 Folder (sic).

In their highly sympathetic treatment of Cully Cobb, Professors Roy Scott and J. G. Shoalmire dismiss, in a very few words, Cobb's responsibility for the almost unbelievable horrors inflicted on sharecroppers. Scott and Shoalmire inform us that Cobb simply did not see social problems as part of his job. This occluded vision on the part of Cobb is difficult to accept in view of the fact that the sole purpose of the cotton acreage reduction contracts was to preserve the South's cotton middle class. It is apparent that Cobb believed that the ends justified the means. With a phalanx of county extension agents serving as staff for the county production committees, adjudicating planter/cropper disputes, and reporting directly to him, Cobb must have known what was occurring in the Mississippi Delta. William Amberson informed Cobb of the evictions occurring in Arkansas, and he reprinted a portion of Cobb's response: "No case of eviction has come to our attention that in any way involved our contract, or has been caused of (sic) the contract, and we have no evidence of wholesale eviction for cause anywhere." By the time Cobb received Amberson's complaints, word from the AAA's own investigators had reached Washington; it confirmed Amberson's claims.<sup>64</sup>

When Amberson resigned from the Board of Trustees of Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms, he included in his statement a passage from Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*:

The most common form of hypocrisy among the privileged class is to assume that their privileges are the just payments with which society rewards especially useful or meritorious functions. . . . it must be proved or assumed that the underprivileged classes would not have the capacity of rendering the same service if given the same opportunity. This assumption

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<sup>64</sup> Roy V. Scott and J. G. Shoalmire, *The Public Career of Cully A. Cobb: A Study in Agricultural Leadership*, (Jackson, MS: College and University Press of Mississippi, 1973), *passim*. Norman Thomas, *The Plight of the Sharecropper* (includes "Report of Survey" made by the Memphis Chapter L.I.D. and the Tyronza Socialist Party under the direction of William R. Amberson) (New York: The League for Industrial Democracy, 1934), 27; Grubbs, 32-38; 39-54.

is invariably made by privileged classes. The educational advantages which privilege buys, and the opportunities for the exercise of authority which come with privileged social position, develop capacities which are easily attributed to innate endowment. The presence of able men among the privileged is allowed to obscure the number of instances in which hereditary privilege is associated with knavery and incompetence. It has always been the habit of privileged groups to deny the oppressed classes every opportunity for the cultivation of innate capacities and then to accuse them of lacking what they have been denied the right to acquire.<sup>65</sup>

Amberson used this passage to complain about Franklin's paternalistic management of the farms and his lack of effort in developing indigenous leadership. Amberson was giving voice to a problem consistently extant among leftist groups, reliance upon leadership from the elitist classes. Amberson and others believed that the farms were deliberately presenting a false financial face to potential donors. Amberson continued his diatribe against Sherwood Eddy until the end of his life. He triumphantly reported to Gene Cox in 1973 that he had met Eddy's grandson and that the grandson admitted Eddy's propensity to stretch the truth. However, Amberson never once accused Eddy of dishonesty for personal financial gain. Sam Franklin, in his account of the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms, took a measured and thoughtful account of Amberson's various accusations. He concluded that the accusations were made with some basis in fact.<sup>66</sup>

Why did the farms fail? One obvious reason is that the farm managers simply were terrible businessmen. Other planters made money (or at least survived) using the same farming techniques and growing the same crops. And few, if any, other planters were in a position to garner financial contributions and free labor from summer volunteers. Of course, few planters were interested in the physical, educational, or moral development of their sharecroppers. As much as the trustees would deny it, and as harsh

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<sup>65</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, 117-18.

<sup>66</sup> Amberson to Gene Cox, March 17, 1973, Cox Collection; Franklin, 72-78.

as it would have sounded to them, the Delta and Providence Cooperative Farms were examples of the very institution they hated. The farms were paternalistic plantations worked by sharecroppers.

The nature of cotton agriculture was changing. Technology, expensive at first but far more economical than human labor in the long run, was becoming a necessary part of profitable cotton production. Even while the Farm Security Administration was settling farmers on more productive land, the likelihood of success for "family sized" farms diminished. Efficient use of expensive technology required much larger acreage.

William Amberson and the Socialist Party of America must share part of the blame. By allowing the farms to come completely under control of the Christian Socialists, they lost any prospect of developing leadership and affecting a class-consciousness-driven economic and social revolution. However, the Socialist Party of America had trouble enough just surviving without expending the enormous resources and energy required to develop fully an agricultural proletariat. The "agrarian" problem has perplexed Marxists of all stripes, in all places, and at all times. Mississippi agrarian Marxists remained perplexed.

## CHAPTER VII

## SHADOWS OVER GOSHEN

*It will be the central point – the garden spot of the North American Continent – where wealth and prosperity culminate. E.N. Lowe, Mississippi State Archeologist, 1857.*

*The country needs . . . the country demands bold, persistent experimentation. It is common sense to take a method and try it: If it fails, admit it frankly and try another. But above all, try something. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, 6 June 1933.*

*President Clinton has sent Congress a proposal to establish a Delta Regional Commission . . . designed to strengthen the economic development of the chronically impoverished lower Mississippi River area. Memphis Business Journal, 9 February 1998.*

Ten years have passed since Congress established the Delta Regional Authority, seventy-five years since New Dealers began experimentation, and 150 since E.N. Lowe rhapsodized over the potential of the Delta to create wealth and prosperity. Perhaps only the lessons forgotten are more egregious than those not learned. With the luxury of time and the clarifying light that comes with time and scholarship, the reasons for the failure of the Tupelo Homesteads, Dyess Colony, and the Delta Cooperative Farm are obvious; whether or not they actually failed is not.

All three projects were experiments; they were built to test possible responses to real or hypothetical economic realities. Success for all three projects would be determined, in large part, by the ability of the clients to forego voluntarily some of the privileges and rights associated with American individualism. In all three projects success depended on the economic cooperation of the clients. The Tupelo Homesteads were designed to meet the requirements of a pleasure economy and radically different manufacturing world. Dyess Colony was an attempt to create in flesh and blood an American myth, a robust class of independent and disinterested yeoman farmers. Delta

Cooperative Farm was supposed to give the means of production to the people and to turn the hearts of man to God. To say categorically that these projects failed is to ignore the primary purpose of experimentation. Arguably, the greatest benefit from experimentation is falsification of theory. Two of the communities, the Tupelo Homesteads and Dyess Colony, were certain to be failures from the very beginning. The failure of the Delta Cooperative Farm was self-inflicted by its leadership.

#### The Tupelo Homesteads

The Tupelo Homesteads were to point the way to a permanent solution to the problems necessarily associated with a pleasure economy and a decentralization of industry. The Division of Subsistence Homesteads could have been successful by its own definition only if the U.S. and world economies got markedly worse or got miraculously better. Should the depression continue its erosion of the manufacturing segment, should the nation's standards of living regress, and should the urban squalor require a redistribution of the population, the Tupelo Homesteads might have been efficacious. Should the planning envisioned by Tugwell, and others, result in a rational economy that allowed a more fulsome distribution of wealth and depended more on the brawn of technology than human muscles or brain power, then the Tupelo Homesteads might have indeed, provided one model of how one might occupy time in a pleasure economy. In the sense that the Tupelo Homesteads were created to respond to specific hypothetical problems and since those problems failed to materialize, there is nothing in the Tupelo Homesteads to falsify.



Neither the continued deterioration of the economy nor the blessings of a pleasure economy emerged. The sense of urgency that had allowed President Roosevelt amazing license in the early depression days gave way to a calmer consideration by politicians and policy makers. As people endured the Great Depression, they became less convinced of the necessity of bold, repetitive experimentation. It was no longer enough by, 1937, to "try something." Without either of the two supposed justifications for the development of part-time subsistence gardening, the purpose of the Tupelo Homesteads and the proposed benefits to society and economy became problematic.

Despite the vision of M.L. Wilson and Rexford Tugwell, the Tupelo Homesteads, by far the most successful of the DSH projects, became a place for middle-class people who were experiencing economic turmoil to recover. The original justification for funding was the need to demonstrate a way that people with part-time employment could maintain a healthy and decent lifestyle by incorporating subsistence gardening. The Tupelo Homesteaders worked every hour they could and, as evidenced by their incomes, they worked full-time. Kathleen Perkins remembered that all heads of households at Tupelo Homesteads held full-time jobs. Bearing in mind the President's assurance that the subsistence homesteads project was not a relief effort, and that the homesteaders were to be financially able to pay mortgages or rents, the local, state, and national screening committees made sure that the Tupelo Homesteaders were competent, responsible, and ambitious. Such people were not content to exist in bare subsistence. The Tupelo

Homesteaders were all employed, they all appeared to be resourceful, and all of them declined to purchase a Tupelo Homestead.<sup>1</sup>

Tupelo, unlike the Delta, was a place of increasing labor demands. It is true that many hill-farmers moved to the Delta when they began to lose their farms during the agricultural depression, but it is also true that growing industrial centers such as New Albany, Amory, and Tupelo drew a large number to town. Northeast Mississippi was diversifying and developing a light-industrial base; the Delta still grappled with monocrop agriculture and an antiquated labor system. When the Tupelo Homesteaders made economic gains, if their job began to provide more hours, if they were successful in saving money, they found that they had options far more attractive than the subsistence homesteads.

The original Tupelo Homesteaders were in an envious place. They were able to rent what were, for the day, marginally acceptable middle class quarters while they managed their finances, increased their earnings, and considered the government's proposition. They found that the benefits of wholesale financing were not sufficient to compensate for missing an opportunity to provide better quarters of their own choosing. The Tupelo Homesteaders made the rational decision. They were confident both in the ultimate fate of the American Economy and in their own ability to make their way. They were correct. In the final analysis, the Tupelo Homesteads simply provided a safe place for ambitious and competent middle class Americans to weather the storms of the depression and temporary financial reversals. The Tupelo Homesteaders were not willing to trade their perceived birthright, that of the pursuit of happiness, for the privilege of

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Perkins, interview by Sara Amy Leach and Leslie Blythe, 17 April 1977, transcript, Natchez Trace Parkway, General Files, Tupelo, MS.

being in debt for thirty years, their integrity dependent on others, in order to purchase a home that was at the bottom tier of white respectability.

The New Deal, in describing the anticipated homesteader, spoke of a new economic entity. The homesteads would produce a new consumer/producer entity. However, this concept was not new for Tupelo or any of the "New South" cities. The efficient coordination between industrial employment and subsistence gardening had been a key reason for Tupelo's phenomenal success. By 1934, growing most of one's food was simply a normal part of life, even for those holding full-time jobs. Only the aged, infirm, or incompetent ("sorry" in the vernacular of the area) did not have sizable gardens. Lorena Hickok, on one of her information seeking tours, commented on a phenomenon she observed at Tupelo. Mentioning the Tupelo Homesteads, she told Harry Hopkins of interviewing a young textile worker. The young man lived about three miles from Tupelo and drove to work every day. He told Hickock that he thought of his wages as "net profit" since he raised almost all of what he needed back on his place. It was this profit that allowed him to buy the automobile he was driving. Wage-work and subsistence farming already seemed to be a very common way of life in Tupelo, said Hickok.<sup>2</sup>

Hickok told Hopkins that Tupelo's experience with subsistence gardening and wage work began in 1923 when a local textile factory manager decided to hire only those who lived in the country and owned their own farms. Of the 2,000 industrial employees, only 700 to 800 actually lived in the city. School buses performed double duty. The buses picked up and returned workers to the city factories and children to the city

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<sup>2</sup> Lorena Hickok to Harry Hopkins, Harry L. Hopkins Paper, FDR Library, Hyde Park, New York.

schools. The Tupelo Homesteaders had no particular economic factor in common. The notion that people would work and raise most of their vegetables, eggs, and milk was not a new notion in Tupelo.<sup>3</sup>

There were no community specific institutions or activities through which notions of community emerged. They did not practice the same trade, work for the same organization, or depend on any single commodity or product for their livelihoods. The Tupelo Homesteaders sent their children to Tupelo Schools, went to church in Tupelo, bought their groceries in Tupelo, and for the most part, worked in Tupelo. They maintained their previous social, religious, and family associations. There was no central principle or activity around which to build a community. The limited duress that the New Dealers applied to encourage cooperation among the Tupelo Homesteaders was not sufficient to disincline them from pursuing the honored American goals of acquisition and intra-class advancement.

The Tupelo Homesteaders were offered opportunity to enter into a thirty-year indenture, at the end of their term they would have a small plot of ground and a very modest home. The Tupelo Homesteaders figured they could do better. They were correct.

#### Dyess Colony

The Colonists at Dyess were on relief. Indeed, the first requirement was that one be on relief and be among the most successful. There was no possibility that the Dyess Colony could produce a community of small yeoman farmers. The plan of incubating a community of 500 or so yeoman farmer families on twenty to forty acre farms was

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

impossible to execute. The false assumptions that made it impossible for the Dyess Colonists to meet the expectations of the bosses are of two types.

The investigative work of Howard Odom and his associates and protégés revealed some apparent physical reasons for the anemic condition of most of the rural citizens of the cotton South. Arthur F. Raper's classic work on two Georgia counties revealed some debilitating physical reasons that small cotton cultivators could no longer flourish or even survive in parts of the eastern cotton belt. Added to the gashing erosion, thin soil and the boll weevil, the ruinous crop financing system put small cotton growers in debt and kept them there. Raper was convincing; his narration gave nuance and depth to the raw statistics. If the three physical problems did not exist, if there was a rational and fair system of crop financing, then perhaps the South's over eight million destitute might find a way out of debilitating poverty.<sup>4</sup>

Dyess Colony did not have any of the physical problems that plagued Raper's two Georgia counties, and the U.S. Government provided the financing and furnish functions heretofore dominated by the cotton aristocracy. Dyess was located in the heart of the Great American Delta. The topsoil was from 40 to 100 feet deep as actually measured on the property. The erosion that occurs in the Delta is "sheet erosion." It occurs along the ridge lands and riverbanks and the soil exposed by erosion is richer than that sloughed off. The boll weevil, so devastating to the cotton areas east of the Delta was, to Delta farmers, a momentary chastisement for lack of diligence, rather than potential and actual disaster. Part of the Delta's relative resistance to the boll weevil was the preferences of

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur F. Raper, *Preface to Peasantry: A Tale of Two Black Belt Counties*, (Columbia: South Carolina, 2005, reprint of Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), *passim*.

the weevil and part was due to the experiments at the Delta Experiment Station. Boll weevils prefer to winter in pine litter, and they generally prefer hilly terrain. If given his preferences, the boll weevil would prefer to live in cotton areas other than the Delta. The scientists at Delta Experiment Station discovered that the application of fertilizer to cotton resulted in a surprising benefit. Agriculturalists had only recently introduced fertilizer to the Delta. Generally, Delta cotton barons elected to save the cost of fertilizer given the minimum increase in yields. However, the application of fertilizer caused cotton to grow more rapidly. By the time each spring that boll weevils began their ravenous raids on cotton fields, cotton in the Delta had already grown beyond the point where the cotton plants were most attractive to the boll weevil. They tended to pass the Delta cotton, to find more appealing cotton plants in the South. Whenever rain or human laziness delayed planting and the application of fertilizer, the boll weevil devastated Delta cotton fields. In the Delta, control of the weevil was relegated to planting and applying fertilizer early in the crop year.<sup>5</sup>

Even with solution to the physical deficiencies that plagued much of the cotton South, and with financing, administration, and management provided by the U.S. Government, the cotton culture was unable to support a class of yeoman cotton farmers. There was something fundamentally wrong with the cotton culture. Even after the obvious problems with land and weevils were resolved, the cotton culture of the South was incapable of supporting a population of yeomen.

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<sup>5</sup> Amy Lipe Taylor, *The Delta Branch Experiment Station: One Hundred Years of Agricultural Research*, edited by James W. Smith and Charles E. Snipes, (Stoneville and Starkville, MS: Mississippi State University, 2004: 24.

The second assumption held that families on small, yet diversified, farms could earn enough cash from a cotton crop to meet their cash needs; their nutritional requirements, for the most part, would come from vegetable and animal husbandry. By 1930, the ability of families to sustain a decent standard of living from a family sized cotton farm was a statistical and physical impossibility. In 1931, Agriculturalists M. G. Vaiden, J.O. Smith, and W. E. Ayers of the Delta Experiment Station in Stoneville, Mississippi published a remarkable bulletin that clearly proved that a traditional family-sized cotton farm could never provide an acceptable standard of living.<sup>6</sup>

Using production figures, costs, and prices received, the Delta Experiment Station Bulletin demonstrated that even in the best of circumstances a family could not survive at a level approaching decent conditions on fifteen acres of cotton production. The Dyess Homesteaders were limited by the AAA to eight acres of cotton per twenty-acre farm. Even those Colonists who had been able to procure forty acres at Dyess would not be able to achieve a middle class level of living based on the cotton acreage allowed. "Making Cotton Cheaper" drove home one unalterable conclusion. Profit from cotton cultivation depended on reducing costs; the most dramatic cost reducing element was the addition of technology in terms of increased animal or machine power. It cost a farmer using one mule and its equipment \$13.09 to cultivate and harvest one acre of cotton. With a two-mule system and implements, the costs per acre fell to \$8.09; the addition of four-row tractor cultivation reduced the per acre cost to \$5.24. The economies of scale, however, required fields much larger than those at Dyess. Dyess Colonists could finance

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<sup>6</sup> M.G. Vaiden, J.O. Smith, and W.E. Ayers, "Making Cotton Cheaper: Can Present Production Costs be Reduced?": Bulletin No. 290 Delta Experiment Station, (Stoneville, Mississippi: Mississippi A & M College, Feb., 1931).

one or two mules, but there was no provision in the original plans for the purchase of tractors or for cotton fields large enough to justify their use. The Colonists at Dyess were expected to achieve yeoman status on plots far too small to generate the required income and without access to truly efficient technology. Vaiden, Smith, and Ayres did not deny that some people lived on the proceeds of small plots farmed on halves; they firmly asserted that people would not continue to do so.<sup>7</sup>

Even if the cooperative associations at Dyess gained the loyalty and support of all the Colonists, even if the Colonists abided by expert advice, and even if the weather and the river behaved, the Colonists had absolutely no chance of attaining the goals of William R. Dyess or Floyd Sharp. The tragedy of Dyess is that no one listened to the real experts on cotton production economics.

#### Delta Cooperative Farm

Of the three communities in this study, the Delta Cooperative Farm was the most heroic, radical, romantic, and rational. Its demise and failure is also the most shameful. One would think that the leaders of liberal socially conscious Christianity and the Socialist Party of America would champion the cause of the dispossessed. One would think that both lines of progressive thought would have honored the worker, shown respect for latent, though undeveloped, abilities and promoted dignity and self-respect. They did not.

When A. James McDonald came to Delta and assumed responsibilities of Office Secretary, he immediately received permission from Sam Franklin to express his opinion about the Farm operation and management. He received permission from Franklin to

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*



read the Colony mail and to converse with other staff and Board of Trustee Members about conditions on the Farm. What McDonald found disturbed him. At the intense displeasure of the Cooperators, Sam Franklin insisted on retaining the services of Mr. Alvin Day, the Farm Manager. Mr. Day was, in the minds of the members of the Farm, nothing more than a recreation of a planter's "riding boss." Day interfered in all of the departments at the Delta Cooperative Farm and his manner was curt and obnoxious.<sup>8</sup>

The complaints about Day and indeed, about a whole lot of what was going down on the Farm were first articulated in a meeting of the membership called by McDonald. Sam Franklin was in New York getting ready for the Cooperative Farms Incorporated Trustee Meeting in February of 1939. In his absence and the absence of any other trustees, McDonald invited the members to a meeting where they could express openly and without the intimidation of Franklin, their opinions about Farm operations.

At the 6 February meeting of the members, McDonald told the members that he would transcribe their words and send a copy to Franklin and the Board in New York in time for their 22 February meeting. Anyone who wished could have remarks omitted; likewise, McDonald would take dictation from any member who wished to add fuller comments in a separate addendum. What occurred at the meeting was no surprise to McDonald. The hand-written minutes of the council meetings of Delta Cooperative Farm illustrate the autocratic manner in which Sam Franklin operated the Farms. George Smith, a black member of the Council and considered the Farm's best farmer, kept handwritten minutes of the meetings beginning in April 1936. Smith was meticulous in

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<sup>8</sup> Delta – Providence Farms, Council Meeting Papers, Volume 1 through 4, Southern Historical Collection, Chapel Hill.

recording the actual language of motions presented to the Council. Time after time, the members would pass a measure only to have Franklin ask them to reconsider. After telling the cooperatives his notions, invariably the membership repealed their just passed motions and passed one according to Franklin's wishes. The membership council was advertised to Delta supporters and to the public as being run by decisions made by the members. That was true only for inconsequential matters or items for which Franklin had no preferences.<sup>9</sup>

For some time prior to the February 1939 Trustees Meeting, the membership at Delta Cooperative Farm believed that support for the Farm was rapidly diminishing. Franklin complained about costs and warned of the need of increased production. The members at Dyess were no longer confident in ever owning the operation. Indeed, a 1938 re-organization of the Delta Cooperative Farm dropped any notion of the farm ever being transferred to the membership.

At the 22 February meeting of the Trustees, William Amberson presented the cold, hard and unchallenged facts regarding misleading publicity and outright lies to supporters. The Farms had consistently misrepresented their true financial condition to donors and Franklin and Eddy ruled the sharecroppers at Delta Cooperative Farm with a disdain and arrogance rarely encountered even among the most refined of the Delta cotton barons. They were also horrible managers.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> William Amberson, "Statement to the Board of Trustees, Cooperative Farms Incorporated, 22 February 1939, Mississippi Valley Historical Collection, MSS36, William Amberson Papers, Special Collection, University of Memphis.

The epistle from the Cooperators to the Trustees, the statements of actual workers was a blistering indictment of the churchmen. Assuming superior management ability, the trustees had made a mess of every operation that they managed. The operations left to the management of the members, at the same time, were the only operations that showed any profit. The Rochdale community store made money every year; a Cooperator managed it. The sawmill was also managed by Cooperators and it too showed a substantial profit. All the other areas, the areas in which the trustees tried to manage from afar or the ones for which "expert" staff was employed suffered continuing and serious deficits and losses. Indeed, profits from the store and sawmill operations often went to pay obligations from other departments rather than as dividends to the members. The members suggested that the paid managers be removed, their positions assumed by Cooperators.<sup>11</sup>

William Amberson had written to Trustees Charles Embry and Arthur Raper prior to the New York meeting to try to inform them of the true condition of the Farms and to enlist their aid in requiring both transparency with the public and true self-management among the cooperators. Both were cautious in their response. At the New York meeting, Amberson recounted years of arrogant paternalistic treatment of the Cooperators at the hands of the Trustees, pointed out blatant misstatements in the summary of financial conditions at the Farm, and charged that the Farm's Trustees had violated the very premise of opening the Farm in the first place. The Trustees, particularly Eddy and Franklin, said Amberson, were dishonest, manipulative, and more interested in personal

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* "Report of meeting of Member of Delta Cooperative Farm," 6 February 1939, Arthur F. Raper Papers, SHC, Chapel Hill.

aggrandizement and the praise of uninformed liberals that in helping the workers gain control of the means of production. Amberson's charges were irrefutable.

Amberson resigned at that meeting and the response of Sam Franklin and Sherwood Eddy would be pitiful if it were not so tragic. Franklin immediately began to devise ways of keeping A. James McDonald from seeing any office correspondence. He arranged for "Mac" to be away from the Farm whenever he was absent, or he arranged to have a volunteer handle the mail. Franklin was more interested in seeing that no negative information made its way to the public.

Franklin and Eddy grew tired of their liberal plaything it seems. They wearied of being the courageous missionaries and the acclaim they received from the uninformed public. They sold the farm, thereby ridding themselves of the problems of poor folks who were just trying to make a living.

#### So What?

One common assumption guided all three of the depression communities. The ability of Homesteaders, Colonists, and Cooperators to improve their financial prospects and living conditions depended on the practical cooperation of the participants. All of the projects claimed that decisions would be made by the members and that innate abilities in the individual would redound to the benefit of the entire community. In all three communities the bosses tried to force cooperation, in all three communities the members refused to be coerced. In all three communities the clients were denied meaningful participation in management.

The current economic troubles of the United States, as evidenced by the continuing problem in the Great American Delta, are often met with ideas that require the

cooperation of various entities. Without transparency of motives, without a clear and full revelation of the status and condition of social and economic efforts, it is unlikely that Americans will ever combine their efforts in a cooperative effort. If a housing project is going to be a safe and pleasant home to residents, the residents must have authority to manage and operate it. They must be entrusted with difficult decisions and when decisions turn out to be ill-advised, they must be allowed to continue their participation. The rapid deterioration of public housing and of community economic endeavors is due, in large measure, to Americans unwillingness to forego the pleasures and prestige of paternalism, a lesson American society has yet to learn.

Americans must learn also that a particularly egregious form of arrogance often colors projects designed for the public good. This arrogance was manifested in the three communities in ways that find resemblance in contemporary affairs. The class status of clients was determined by the opinion of those who deemed themselves competent to make such judgments and able to decide at what level a specific class should be satisfied. It mirrors the complaints of some cotton barons about the overly generous subsistence provided by the Red Cross in the flood or the New Deal in the depression. Black folks, alleged the cotton aristocracy, just did not need as much money or comfort as white folks. Likewise, the failed sharecroppers at Dyess would or should be contented, and grateful for amenities much less comfortable than those provided for the middle-class white people at Tupelo.

Another way in which this insufferable and egregious arrogance is communicated is by the aspirations allowed various classes. Every year the Colonists at Dyess were told that their modest homes, their chickens, and milch cows, and vegetable gardens would

provide more security for them than any job or profession. They should glory in the security offered by a subsistence farm; they should not aspire to greater economic status. The bosses discouraged client aspirations of becoming wealthy or significant. Even President Roosevelt on occasion suggested that people be satisfied with "a competence" and eschew notions of becoming wealthy.

Whatever form the Delta Regional Commission takes, whatever programs it institutes to deal with the crushing poverty that has historically plagued the rich land, the history of the three communities suggests that success will not come if the participants are marginalized, judged, and treated with contempt. The concept of cooperation for the greater good has yet to be fairly tried among this nation's poor and marginalized. Tupelo, Dyess, and Delta were not fair attempts. In that sense all three experiments were indeed successful. They have taught a stern lesson about how arrogance and paternalism can destroy a vision. However, the most egregious misapplication of any education is that of lessons not remembered.

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